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# “Us versus them” mentalities in co-managing a Natura 2000 forest: Narratives, identities, and a culture of conflict

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## Abstract

Multistakeholder co-management is no blueprint for smooth and accepted environmental policy implementation. Parallel processes of cooperation and conflict rather shape co-managing processes, which is the focus of this article. Combining the analysis of narratives, identities, and relational structure through means of social network analysis builds the conceptual and methodological foundation for this case study to explore a perpetual conflict between actors involved in co-designing the management plans for a local Natura 2000 forest. Two opposing narratives are identified as competing over power and competency in discussions about the management plans for the Natura 2000 forest. Negative characterization frames and antagonizing with the other side fuels an “us versus them” mentality among the actors in the co-management process and over time, a culture of conflict has become institutionalized. Interactions between the actors from the case study seemingly build on a complex, iterative pattern of disputes that is barely breakable and reversible into cooperative attitudes. Surprisingly, this culture of conflict does not resonate with the relational structure between actors in the case study as descriptive social network analysis shows. This case represents an intriguing puzzle pointing to an incongruence between relational and discursive mechanisms underlying cooperation-conflict dynamics in multistakeholder co-management, which is relevant for future examinations of cooperation and conflict in social network analyses. The results are discussed in light of power dynamics and concluded with an outlook to conflict research.

## KEYWORDS

collaboration, policy implementation, power dynamics, social identities, social network analysis

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Since 1992, the EU Habitat and Bird Directive and Natura 2000 are Europe's flagship policies to protect and restore biodiversity by developing a green infrastructure of habitats (European Commission, 2008). The importance of these policies is evident in light of accumulating evidence for declining rates of biodiversity and ecosystem functions worldwide (Cardinale et al., 2012; Chase

et al., 2020; IPBES, 2019). Conservation experts advocate for rapid transformation of the root drivers underlying biodiversity loss and argue for a quick expansion of nature reserves by 2030 (Díaz et al., 2019; Dinerstein et al., 2019). However, European Member States have struggled to implement Natura 2000 protected areas (PA) for biodiversity protection in general and in particular in the forest sector (Beunen et al., 2009; Winkel et al., 2015). Nature and habitats in Europe remain severely degraded (European Environment

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Agency, 2021). One out of many reasons for this slow progress is the consequence of a hierarchical steered designation process of Natura 2000 sites, which superseded regional identity, place attachment and autonomy on the ground level (Borrass, 2014; Gibbs et al., 2007; Paavola, 2004).

Many of the designated Natura 2000 forests in Germany fall on managed and privately owned land, in which traditional forestry and an attachment to place can hardly be radically transformed from outside (Van Oosten, 2013). Engaging local communities and local knowledge in partnerships is a key implementation strategy for integrating conservation into existing practices (Berkas, 2004; Young et al., 2013). This is commonly referred to as co-management and involves state and non-state actors collectively addressing problems through a learning- and consensus-oriented, place-based process (Plummer et al., 2017). A shift from hierarchical to collaborative governance mechanisms was also observed during the European Natura 2000 implementation. In the 2000s, authorities have started to recognize that the success of Natura 2000 measures defined in site specific management plans depended largely on the acceptance and cooperation with landowners and required some form of coordination (Ferranti et al., 2014; Kamphorst et al., 2017). However, applying a collaborative approach to Natura 2000 management is not a blueprint for smooth implementation or accepted policies (De Pourcq et al., 2015; Díez et al., 2015). On the contrary, collaborative governance arrangements are rather emergent processes characterized by struggles over legitimacy, meaning and competing narratives (Koch et al., 2021; Wesseling et al., 2011), blurring of roles and responsibilities due to decentralization (Schneider et al., 2003) and an entanglement of cooperation and conflict in actor relationships (Robins et al., 2011).

Thus, despite normative rationales and good intentions, environmental co-management processes are rarely fair, equal or open-ended, but rather messy and complex, commonly described as deep power struggles (Morrison et al., 2019). Cooperation and conflict often operate in parallel and actors' behavior influence the process to a large extent (Redpath et al., 2013; Stoll-Kleemann, 2001). A new perspective in network research therefore argues for studying cooperation and conflict as companion concepts rather than focusing only on collaborative relationships (Bodin et al., 2020). Yet, the processes underlying human cooperation and conflict are complex and cannot be simply equated with the opposite: if actors do not collaborate or trust each other, they are in conflict with each other. Therefore, this article investigates collaboration and conflict through a discursive and identity theoretic perspective and explores contextualities through narratives and identity constructions that circulate in and influence cooperation-conflict dynamics between actors in a German rural area. An exploratory case study approach as well as descriptive social network analysis guided the investigation of the following question: How do narratives and identity constructions shape the interaction between actors involved in a co-management arrangement to facilitate the implementation of Natura 2000 in forests?

Section 2 of this article introduces conceptualizations about narratives and identity constructions and offers a conceptual framework

for the analysis. Section 3 describes the research design and presents background information on the case study and methods used. Section 4 presents and discusses the empirical results on two narratives, identity constructions and the reported relationships between the actors. In Section 5, the results and limitations are discussed, while Section 6 concludes the article and recommends practical approaches to govern conflicts in multiactor settings.

## 2 | NARRATIVES AND IDENTITIES IN ENVIRONMENTAL CO-MANAGEMENT

### 2.1 | Narratives in multi-actor co-management

Ideal-type principles for co-management prescribe it as a knowledge partnership between state actors and stakeholders who collaboratively discuss and learn how to solve a set of problems that neither can solve individually (Armitage et al., 2011). Collaboration means that these actors have to approach to develop an understanding of each other's goals and concerns to cultivate a common ground for action according to a mutual benefit—fully sustainable managed and conserved forests in this article (Ansell & Gash, 2008). From a politics lens on co-management, struggles, and conflicts over the meaning of proper forest management are an essential part in this process (Winkel et al., 2011). Co-management and policy implementation at the “street level” involves negotiations between bureaucratic executors and affected recipients who reinterpreted the meaning of Natura 2000 and act upon accordingly (Borrass, 2014). Human language shapes people's perception and interpretation of reality, making the cultivation of a common ground a more or less difficult process depending on the variability of interpretative frames that actors reproduce in the negotiation (Dewulf & Bouwen, 2012).

This article draws on Koch et al. (2021) and distinguishes between narrative and narration. Narratives as shared interpretive frames legitimize and bestow meaning to a collaborative arrangement through common normative views, shared assumptions, and a shared emplotment legitimated by the group. Furthermore, narratives are an important vehicle for interpretative frames that actors construe in order to simplify complex issues, create legitimating missions and to navigate through high levels of uncertainty, complexity and polarization (Koch et al., 2021; Veland et al., 2018). Narratives serve as lenses through which actors interpret reality and try to subtly shape a “group mentality” influencing social interaction, how problems and solutions are framed, what to do about them or mobilize other actors from their network. Competing narratives discursively shape and nurture power struggles in co-management, whereas shared narratives build the basis for collaboration (Table 1). Narrations on the other hand refer to an individual verbal, cognitive representation of one's own past experiences, expectations to oneself and others, values or self-images and characterizations of other actors.

Previous research on policy narratives highlighted the plot as a central structural component of narratives and narrations that arranges events, people, and actions in a temporal and causal

**TABLE 1** Conceptual framework for studying cooperative mentalities (“us and them” settings) and conflicting mentalities (“us versus them” settings), including characterization frames, narrative characterizations, underlying motivations and expected impacts on the interaction and social structure between actors in the regional cooperation.

	Ingroup mentalities	Outgroup mentalities	Conceptual description
Characterization frame (Wondolleck et al., 2003)	Unifying and positive frames Individual engages in prototyping behavior, that is increasing the complexity of the prototype of the superordinate category	Distinguishing and negative frames Individual engages in stereotyping behavior, that is keeping the superordinate category simple to exclude (perceived) inferior others	The wording and frames used to describe oneself or other individuals/groups drawing on learned knowledge, institutions, and experiences
Emplotment (Koch et al., 2021)	Shared narratives that derive their coherence and plausibility from a complex and diverse set of categories and identities	Fragmented narratives that draw coherence and plausibility from a perceived deviant opponent	Emplotment describes the process of encoding one's own interpretation into a coherent story and includes categorization, identification, and positioning
Simple narrative character (Jones et al., 2014)	Hero/victim characterization	Villain/victim characterization	The symbolic use of ideal-type characters to transport meaning and attached emotions and legitimize behavior. Unlike hero or villain, the victim characterization is not clearly assignable, that is it can be used in prototyping as well as stereotyping characterizations
Intentionality of framing	Showing solidarity and companionship Demonstrate support, commitment and trust Being inclusive and emphasize commonalities and equality	Blaming and shaming; Pointing out a scapegoat for problems and suffering; Discredit others' values and perspectives, knowledge or experiences; Highlight boundaries and intractable differences	This refers to the discursive practices used to reach (strategically) a particular objective, in this case the framing for collaboration or conflict
Expected impact on group interaction	Increased willingness for interaction, connecting to others, creating comfort, and positive emotions	Highlighting increased conflict and divides, antagonizing with others, creating tensions and negative emotions	The assumed reactions of ingroup or outgroup actors
Expected impact on social structure between actors (Prell, 2012)	Cohesive group in which a high proportion of the actors share strong, direct, mutual, and positive ties	Fragmented groups with no connection at all or only a few direct, weak and possibly negative ties connect single actors or subgroups	The assumed structure of relational ties between actors

sequence (Jones & McBeth, 2010; Viehöver, 2001). The beginning usually outlines a problematic situation, followed by an explanation of the roots or consequences of the problem and ending with a solution that sometimes takes the form of a so-called pathway. Past research has also studied typical plotlines, for instance, “the Golden Age lost” warning of rapid changes or crises, or “the pioneer's tale” that describe how particular action leads out of bad situations and brings benefits (Sandercock, 2003). Furthermore, assigning a role to actors in narratives is powerful for allocating accountability in a positive and negative sense and for making particular actions plausible (Chabay et al., 2019). Previous studies based their analyses on a simple heuristic differentiating among three distinct characters. The hero provides widespread benefits to the group, the villain brings great doom and intensifies the problem situation and the victim has to suffer from problem consequences or bear the risks of non-action (Lebel & Lebel, 2018; Shanahan et al., 2013). Emplotment and inherent

characterizations will play a role in the identity constructions as well as in the intractability or resolvability of a conflict and together influence collaboration (Wondolleck et al., 2003). Narrations of actors can strengthen differences and set boundaries separating themselves from perceived outgroup actors, or actors can highlight commonalities with perceived ingroup actors, which is why narrative conceptualizations are often associated with identity making (Hajer, 2005; Viehöver, 2001).

## 2.2 | Identity constructions and characterization frames

In light of the increased need for diverse knowledge systems in environmental governance and management, identity theory has become more important despite little attention in the past (O'Brien, 2012;

Tengö et al., 2017). Environmental co-management brings together heterogeneous actors who seldom share everyday practices and experiences, or who rely on similar perspectives and narratives. A constructive space is needed to negotiate and develop a way forward through recurring interactions (Ansell et al., 2017). Network theory specifies that those actors, who perceive each other as more alike, will start to interact more and develop stronger bonds with each other, eventually developing denser subgroup structures that can lead to increased social capital and transformative capacity (Barnes-Mauthe et al., 2015; McPherson et al., 2001). In fact, policy process theories, such as the ACF associate core belief systems with the strength of ties and understand core beliefs as the main driver of the formation of stable actor coalitions (Weible & Sabatier, 2005). However, the social identity approach is based on a combination of beliefs, social norms, and everyday behaviors typical of a certain social category. In addition, people have several social identities that become salient in different contexts or as contexts change (Mackay et al., 2021). The perception and construction of identity play important roles and influences how actors perceive themselves and others, for example as kind and trustful or as malevolent in collaborative settings (Stern & Coleman, 2015).

The concept of identity encompasses an internalized set of meaning that provides expectations for individuals in social roles. Therefore, identity theory studies how and why meanings and expectations become attached to specific identities. In contrast to a focus on the individual, the social identity approach studies the mechanisms through which people and groups negotiate and manage their identities in social interaction and includes notions of the social norms, embeddedness, situated and shared group-related characteristics of humans (Hogg, 1992). The social identity approach consists of two interrelated theories, namely social identity theory (SIT) developed by Tajfel and Turner and self-categorization theory (SCT) later advanced by Turner (Hornsey, 2008). The former theory addresses intergroup relations and ingroup versus outgroup thinking and behavior, that is “us versus them” separations, while the latter studies the transformation in self-perception from personal to social/human identity and deals with “I and me” versus “we and us” distinctions (i.e., acting as an individual versus acting as a group member) (Bercht, 2021; Hornsey, 2008).

This article focuses on the former conceptualization to study intergroup relations and cooperation-conflict dynamics in co-management. An individual constructs a self-concept based on unique features, while this self-concept takes the form of self-categorizations to fit into a social category because, in parallel, individuals do their best to belong to social groups. Self-categorizations are therefore similar characterizations of a particular category and distinct from characterizations of other categories, for example private foresters versus state foresters (Forsyth, 2014; Hogg & Reid, 2006). This process of cognitive categorization also functions when actors encounter other actors classifying those automatically into group specific categories and decreasing much of the daily complexity. Actors' perception of these people and the way they treat them are influenced by their beliefs about the qualities of people in such groups (Forsyth, 2014,

p. 84). Some scientific fields also speak of the mental model of a person who helps with coming to understand (Hinsz, 1995; Rosner, 1995), whereas social interactionist theories assume this meaning to be found in constructions of reality, such as narratives (see Section 2.1).

A prototyping process follows—or stereotyping in a negative sense for outgroup members—and builds on cognitive, motivational, cultural, or socio-historical constructs learned through experience, education, or socialization. People tend to favor others whom they perceive as more similar and consider them part of the ingroup, while they tend to reject people, they perceive to be different and from the outgroup. Ingroup members are cognitively connected through sharing specific norms, beliefs, and feelings (Hogg & Reid, 2006), which influence what these members communicate and express in the language they use (Koch et al., 2021; Wondolleck et al., 2003). Including social identity constructions into reflections about co-management approaches is thus worthwhile to increase understanding of the cooperation and conflict dynamics and why despite all efforts actors sometimes rather prefer to work against rather than engaging productively with each other (Colvin et al., 2015).

Wondolleck et al. (2003) define identity constructions as characterization frames originating from cognitive sources, such as stereotypes, attributions, contextual influences, aspirations, psychological factors, and values. Positive characterization frames emphasize a connection with others (prototypes), while negative characterization frames stress the differences between these individuals or groups (stereotypes) (Hogg & Reid, 2006). Positive and negative characterizations are mechanisms that promote social cohesion with members of the ingroup or tension and exclusion with members of the perceived outgroup, and foster an ingroup/outgroup dynamic “wherein outsiders are stereotyped and motives are attributed to them that are frequently inaccurate but are nonetheless imposed in order to elevate the ingroup's view of themselves.” (Wondolleck et al., 2003, p. 208). Prototyping and stereotyping are social processes that are influenced by the dominant group mentality—a term that refers to the sum of ideas, perspectives, emotions, and the psychological composition of a group during a particular period, within a specific geographical area and social context (Dubov, 1995). This article builds on the categorization by Wondolleck et al. (2003) to discriminate between unifying and distinguishing characterization frames and combines these with hero, villain, and victim characterizations from narrative theory to make assumptions about the social structure in the co-management arrangement (Table 1).

### 3 | RESEARCH DESIGN

#### 3.1 | Case study

The case study examines a co-management arrangement purposefully created in March 2017 to support the local implementation of Natura 2000 in the case study region. It is located in a German rural cultural landscape where agriculture and animal husbandry have developed to

be major pillars of the local economy, while small landscape elements could still be preserved. One dominant landscape element exhibiting regional nature is a forest. Approximately 3500 private forest owners own two-thirds of the forest area; the other third belongs to the federal state and is managed and administered by the State Forestry Public Enterprises. In 2006, large parts of the forest became designated as a Natura 2000 area, thereupon the legal enactment had been challenging for years, and eventually came to a hold, while political pressure from above to speed up its implementation had increased over the years. After several troublesome years, the director of the NPA created a platform between state agencies and affected stakeholders to improve communication and the long-term implementation of Natura 2000 in the district.

Multiple stakeholders and the nature protection authority (NPA) jointly submitted an application to the state for funding to set up a communal co-managing arrangement—together initiated and named it the regional cooperation—to collaborate on the design of Natura 2000 management plans under the direction of the NPA (Table 2). Additionally, the funding allowed to employ a regional manager, who became affiliated with a local nature park whose territory overlapped largely with the designated Natura 2000 forest. The regional manager's task was to facilitate overall communication between the members of the regional cooperation and the initiation of co-managed projects for forest conservation. The regional cooperation met quarterly in cooperation sessions that the regional manager prepared. The NPA pursued the goal of writing the management plans for the designated Natura 2000 forest in close collaboration with the stakeholders. Therefore, discussions during these meetings were about concrete Natura 2000 measures and how private forest owners and state foresters could include these measures into their everyday portfolios.

**TABLE 2** Actor groups and number of actors participating in the regional cooperation and part of this case study.

The regional cooperation (N = 22)		
Authorities and state officers		Member since
Lower nature protection authority (NPA)	3	Beginning (initiator)
Chamber of agriculture	1	Beginning
Chamber of forestry (private forestry office)	1	Beginning (part of application)
Office for regional development	1	September 2019
Public enterprises and stakeholders		
Local Nature Park	1	March 2017 (regional manager)
State-owned forestry	4	March 2017
Private forest owner associations	5	Beginning (part of application)
Agriculture	2	Beginning (part of application)
Water management	2	March 2017
Local hunting associations	2	March 2017

Private forest owners have in-depth knowledge of their property, but also have their own management objectives, which need to be aligned with the Natura 2000 measurements in the management planning. Gaining forest owners' trust, acceptance, and willingness to cooperate was therefore necessary and recognized by the local NPA. To protect the anonymity and privacy of the participants, names about the region and people were avoided.

### 3.2 | Research approach, positionality, and data collection

A relational narrative approach provided the rationale for undertaking the research and assisted in exploring cooperation and conflict in the regional cooperation. A narrative approach pursues the aim of studying human experience and in particular examines the meaning in stories, arguing that people are storytellers and create themselves and reality through narrative (Fisher, 1985; Krauß & Bremer, 2020). Furthermore, creating meaning from diverse interpretative frames in a social context also affects the types of relationships that a person has with others and therefore the structure that binds them (Fuhse, 2009). I collected and combined qualitative data through narrative interviews with data on the social relational structure through means of social network analysis tools from all members of the regional cooperation (Table 2).

Undertaking qualitative research in general and following a narrative approach in particular required me as a researcher to get close to my case study and case participants. To obtain a deep understanding of cooperation and conflict dynamics in the case study, I needed to know how the case participants made sense of and explained the co-management that they experienced (Moon et al., 2019). My intention was to study and observe the case participants in interaction during the cooperation sessions, ideally to gain profound insights into the motivations and rationales underlying their behavior. Thus, it seemed reasonable for me to become part of the case study by regularly attending meetings over two and a half years, to build knowledge about all members' subjective perspectives and experiences by speaking to them personally. In addition, my presence helped me to get close enough to the participants in order to conduct high-quality conversations instead of mechanistic, superficial interviews (Hermanowicz, 2002). I discussed the case study, the research design and the findings with three close colleagues extensively to limit biased interpretation. With the approval of all participants, I participated actively in meetings and excursions over a period of two and a half years, from August 2019 to December 2021, while I made unstructured observations, took field notes and obtained access to written minutes of prior meetings. I had also been in regular exchange with the regional manager and discussed developments happening during this period. From September 2019 to February 2020, I collected case study data—mostly from visiting the participants at home—through the application of a mixed methodology.

First, I guided the participants through a questionnaire (N = 22) to obtain information on the network structure. This questionnaire



included a series of social relational questions to generate network data using a stakeholder roster, which listed all the actors involved in the regional cooperation (Robins, 2015). I asked participants to indicate if, how often and about what they talked about when they interacted with each of the listed cooperation members. Furthermore, I asked them to point out actors that they trust to talk to in relevant matters. Relational data were organized in  $N \times N$  matrices in Microsoft Excel to store the directed binary network data and for further analysis and visualizations.

Afterwards, I conducted and recorded narrative interviews with the participants ( $N = 17$ ) in German to obtain their subjective perspective and personal experience. I posed an open narrative stimulating question that encouraged the participants to tell an impromptu story about their lived experiences in direct interactions from the retrospective: “I would like you to tell me how the regional cooperation has started for you and how it then continued until today. I would like your own personal experience to become clear to me. Therefore, I ask you to elaborate on any experiences that come to your mind and seem relevant. You can take as much time as you need. I will not interrupt you for now, just take some notes on questions, which I will address later.”

Respondents had no prior possibility to prepare for this question, which meant that they had to reproduce the chains of events in a meaningful way and reconstruct personal understandings and meanings of these situations in order to allow me (as the listener) to partake in their experience (Küsters, 2009). As such, a narrative interview pursues less of the generation of information, but rather contributes to the social practice of constructing personal experience and cultural understandings to gain access to people's interpretive frames of their life contexts to understand their lived experiences (Bremer et al., 2017; Koch et al., 2021). Before the data were collected, the participants provided informed consent in writing to participate in the study, in which they were also informed about their voluntary participation and their right to withdraw at any time during the study as well as the assurance that their personal data would be protected and not given to any third party.

### 3.3 | Data analysis

The openness of the interview method required the analysis to follow an inductive thematic analysis to be able to compare the individual storylines and to reduce the complex interview material. Thematic analysis is a flexible tool for identifying and reporting patterns (themes) within the data without compromising its complexity (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through rereading the interviews several times, I became familiar with the data and generated an initial set of categories on cooperative and conflict interaction that members of the regional cooperation described. I used these categories for every interview in the first round of coding exercise. I then searched for overarching themes for the initial categories, and reviewed the coding and predefined themes iteratively. After reviewing, I defined and renamed the themes and recoded the interview material in a

second round of coding. Following this technique, I analyzed and differentiated between two narrative themes circulating in the regional cooperation, which are detailed in Section 4. I also applied this technique to explore identity constructions that participants used in the narrative interviews to describe their ingroup and outgroup behavior and to describe the processes of cooperation and conflicts. I discussed and reflected on the interpretative analysis with colleagues. MaxQDA was used as a computational tool for the coding of the interview material throughout (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019). The selected quotes shown in Section 4 are verbatim English translations from the German interviews.

Furthermore, I used the relational data from the questionnaires to visualize the regional cooperation as a co-management network. Weighted relational data were derived based on the frequency of reported interactions between participants in the regional cooperation as well as based on the reported trust that actors had in others. The Gephi software was used for further network analysis and visualization (Bastian et al., 2009).

## 4 | RESULTS

### 4.1 | Two divergent narratives shape the conflict in the regional cooperation

Even though the regional cooperation as a co-managing body started officially in 2017, the topic of Natura 2000 has accompanied the regional debate much longer. In fact, since the adoption of the habitat directive (HD) in 1992, private landowners and users have formed alliances partly to slow down the implementation, and later on—when they realized that this path was a dead end—to influence the authorities' decisions on the safeguarding process for Natura 2000. Land continues to be immensely valuable in the wider region because of pressures on land availability from the strong animal husbandry industry, human settlement, and infrastructure developments. As such, the aim of the EU HD and Natura 2000 to transform arable land into a green network of PAs represented a controversial intervention with a long history of disputes between the local government, the NPA, and local land users.

The failure to find a consensus between diverging perspectives for appropriate forest management co-evolved and was fueled by two competing narratives that the members of the regional cooperation retold time and time again. From my interpretations, I derive one as the “social responsibility of private property” narrative reproduced predominantly by NPA actors stemming from an institutional planning perspective (Table 3). One NPA representative recalled,

“The regional cooperation, also certainly important, from the initialization until today, because we have noticed that the process of safeguarding [Natura 2000 areas], where we have talked a lot with individuals, has pretty much gotten out of hand. Therefore, it hasn't achieved the goals that we were pursuing. That was

**TABLE 3** Summary of findings: Members from the regional cooperation reproduce two competing narratives and antagonizing characterization frames.

Characterization frames	Both groups use stereotypes and negative frames to emphasize the other group's unwillingness to collaborate and to show one's own good will for collaboration at the same time	
Narrative	Social responsibility narrative	Imposed restrictions and losses narrative
Emplotment	“Private forest owners have to fulfill the law and act according to a responsible principle for social welfare on their private property” and “Local authorities are under tremendous pressure to implement higher level policy objectives”	“Private forest owners, land owners and users suffer from imposed restrictions and losses by a mistrusting state in an authoritarian system” and “We endure the consequences of severe environmental changes, e.g. droughts and climate change, while not receiving any compensation or support”
Simple narrative character	Mostly villain character is construed for private forest owners for example “They have never listened to us and think we are driven by extreme ideology” Sometimes victim role ascribed to NPA or other authorities to stress that higher political levels urge them to take swift action which they cannot ignore	Affected stakeholders mostly construct a victim role for themselves for example “They distrust us because we are not managing our forests like they want” or “We foresters suffer from the bureaucracy imposed on us” The NPA is presented as ignorant villain who is not willing to understand the traditions of good forestry
Intentionality of framing	Responsibility for slow policy progress is being sought from the resistant, inflexible private forest actors to blame them for playing a time game	Framing used to increase the impression that the NPA mistrusts and considers local ecological forest knowledge of stakeholders wrong
Impact on group interaction	Antagonizing with the collective identity of the outgroup highlights perceived persistent injustice and unwillingness to collaborate. A mindset of two opposing camps, that is the “us versus them” mentality, reinforces competition and a power play leading to unresolved conflicts that opens doors for further discursive polarization	
Expected impact on social structure between actors	Two loosely connected subgroups are expected. One cluster comprises all Natura 2000 opponents, such as private forest owners and agricultural representatives; the other cluster includes Natura 2000 proponents, such as the involved authorities. The regional manager is expected to have a high betweenness centrality, that is to connect both disconnected subgroups in the network	

now to some extent our lesson learned that we are trying to steer the topic of Natura 2000 as a whole back on a more planned course.” (Int3).

The NPA actors described the underlying instrumental rationale for engaging with stakeholders in the regional cooperation. Specifically, they had not been willing to negotiate core principles of Natura 2000 with stakeholders during the meetings of the regional cooperation—as evident from reading the meeting protocols, there had been many arguments about this limitation between NPA actors and affected forest owners in the past about this limitation. Instead, NPA actors and other state actors hoped for more legitimate policy implementation by giving private forest owners the space to design concrete Natura 2000 measures (creating ownership) and therefore creating acceptance for new forest management practices.

With this reasoning, they drew from an institutionalized social responsibility narrative of “Eigentum verpflichtet” (GG Art. 14), which acknowledges that the ownership of private property entails certain rights, but also societal obligations that private forest owners have to fulfill in their forest patches. State actors constantly reconstructed this narrative in the interviews by explaining to recognize the respective property rights of private forest owners in the designated Natura 2000 protected forest areas, but every forest owner and forester

must comply with the new forest management regulation in the respective Natura 2000 areas to preserve Natura 2000 habitats and species for a greater societal purpose. As a background note, in the case study region, Natura 2000 PAs were in the process of becoming ensured through the legal route, namely the safeguarding of nature protection or landscape protection sites. NPA authorities explained that private forest owners will not be obliged in the future to implement additional measures specified in the management plans to restore a favorable conservation status. These plans remain and are a voluntary component of the regulation. One NPA participant explained,

“We prescribe [nature] conservation by regulation, but development [toward a favorable conservation status] can only be achieved by voluntary measures—in other words, I cannot decree that someone has to do something, I can only decree that something is not done. And that is the very big difference. And the management plans, that is about doing something. We don't order that either, because we're usually on private land, we need the landowner's acceptance.” (Int1).

For example, “ordering measures” from the quote concerned forest management practices, such as maintaining lying and standing



deadwood, cultivating habitat trees, afforestating native tree species or relocating skid trails to improve the conservation status. All these practices were discussed between the members of the regional cooperation as options for nature friendly management. The difficult point had been to decide whether these practices were written into the decree or in the management plan. The first option would necessitate foresters to subordinate their forest management to the orders of the Natura 2000 regulation, falling under their social responsibility, while with the second option, foresters would receive compensation, that is contractual nature protection.

NPA actors defended the rigorous decree approach and reported that enough adjustments had been allowed in the past, and the rules in the regulations were the least common conservation measures that private forest owners must meet. In their view, the free-riding economic paradigm in the minds of foresters led to large spruce monocultures and the use of large machinery in forestry while ignoring environmental well-being for a long time and gaining from nature's benefits without considering the consequences. NPA actors as well as the agricultural state representative and hunting actors argued that the only way forward is to learn to accept the enforcement of Natura 2000 regulation. Additionally, resonating in this narrative of NPA actors was the criticism of taking a liberal value system, private freedom and autonomy for granted and unchallengeable. Forest owners' pride, representing a feeling of superiority, and unwillingness to abandon some of these freedoms has blocked the achievement of more important societal—and political—sustainability goals, such as nature and biodiversity protection. Furthermore, some state actors furthermore argued that pro and contra contestations of Natura 2000 constitutes a time game that bought private forest owners time to find ways around this policy. Instead, this maneuver steered valuable time and capacity from state authorities that have been mandated to implement Natura 2000 and are themselves under tremendous pressure from higher state and EU levels due to implementation failures of Natura 2000 in the past.

The second narrative runs counter to the first one and is about "imposed restrictions and losses" that is solely reproduced by actors from forestry and agriculture. They usually started to tell that since the EU Habitat Directive was adopted, private land owners have perceived the regulation as a top-down imposed limitation of their agency, self-efficacy, and decision-making power (Table 3). They feel disempowered by the compulsory, stringent regulation that restrains the freedom of landowners and users to decide what is best for their own patch of forest and what trees they would like to cultivate in future—an autonomy that they and their ancestors have always had. One participant told me about a befriended family,

"Now you must imagine how such a family feels, which has done everything right for 200 years. They have a wonderful, species-rich forest, which should really have been rewarded [...]. That is an achievement. And what do they [NPA] do, exactly the opposite, they punish this family and say, you are not allowed to go in there anymore, you are not allowed to do that

anymore, you are only allowed to use it in a restricted way, every cave tree has to stay. That is the worst form of expropriation we have had. Apart from what happened in the East after the "Wende" [note: familiar German expression for the German Reunification in 1990]. This is a truly unprecedented expropriation of landowners, and in my opinion, it far exceeds social responsibility." (Int16).

Private forest owners are conscious of the uncertainty from environmental changes and caution in the conversations against the negative impacts of climate change and other rapid environmental changes, such as experiencing the drought years in 2018 and 2019 and a rapid increase in bark beetle populations in German forest areas. Consequently, they argue that free choices in tree selection are absolutely needed to be able to experiment and learn what tree species can cope with environmental change in the future, which in their view is a much greater future challenge.

Furthermore, the private forest representatives in the regional cooperation claim to think about time horizons of at least 60 years since freshly planted trees need a long time before they can be harvested. Some argued that this forestry paradigm is incompatible with a policy system in which politicians call for urgent radical changes in every new administration. In contrast, Hoogstra and Schanz (2009) showed that 15 years is the maximum planning horizon of foresters and discussed the inconsistency between wishful thinking and reality. In this context, it leaves the impression that private forest owners take every opportunity to demonstrate the incompatibility of Natura 2000 legislation with state-of-the-art forest management. Additionally, several private forest owners and state foresters described their special relationship with the managed forest, with special single trees and with nature in particular. The private forest owners described their forests as "familiar" that can be "relied upon." It meant a piece of home and family history that could be experienced as part of their own life story.

As a consequence, most private forest and landowners felt not esteemed about the ecological values they had added to their forests and what they had managed well in the past. Forest owners regarded themselves as protectors of nature, as they are closely related to nature and their forest patch, and as they spend much time and energy in the forest and on forest management. They stick to the argument that sustainability stems from forestry and underlies their common guiding economic principle to pursue sustainable and multi-functional forestry. Many private forest owners therefore also regard the Natura 2000 regulation as an unacceptable increase in bureaucratic power lacking the institutional capacity to improve environmental problems in the forest. One representative argues,

"I have said a hundred times that those who bring bureaucracy into the forest are not protecting the forest, but instead protecting the bureaucracy. And that is exactly what has happened. An infinite number of people are hired, devouring millions. Much more could

have been achieved with the money by giving it directly to those who work with nature.” (Int12).

In addition, this quote hints at perceived distributional injustices of financial resources as well as conflicts of recognition of private forest owners. With the perceived increase in Natura 2000 bureaucratization, private forest owners' fears of growing bureaucratic inflexibilities that do not give leeway to adapt to projected environmental changes intensify as well. The fear of imposed restrictions and losses from above often led to emotionally charged debates between participants in the regional cooperation, who engaged in blaming and shaming the other side and making it very difficult to find a common way forward.

## 4.2 | Antagonizing characterizations provoke a conflict mentality

The narrative descriptions highlight a rather contradictory atmosphere in the regional cooperation. In particular, antagonizing collective identities, such as “private forest owners versus NPA representatives” and “forestry versus nature conservation” pervades in many personal experiences and represents a pattern in many conversations. Antagonizing with the collective identity of the “other” seemingly creates strong companionship with the respective ingroup (Table 3). For example, one private forest owner directly blames NPA actors as the villains, “But they think to give us such requirements. That is the state's distrust of its citizens, that they do not handle their property responsibly.” (Int12). In the eyes of some land-use representatives, NPA actors represent the illicit authority, who cannot be trusted, as they impose an unlawful policy program on private forest owners that allows for no alternatives or flexibility. Hence private forest owners feel being pushed into a corner standing in stark contrast to their high independence and autonomy, which are characteristics of private forest owners as also indicated in a study by Joa and Schraml (2020). Private forest owners point out that they principally engage in forestry because it is a way of life rather than an economic undertaking. More specifically, they regard themselves as stewards of their forests, because they perceive themselves to be more involved with nature than anyone else and they fear that their traditional knowledge and practices are being violated under the new paradigm of Natura 2000. In fact, they feel being labeled as outlaws with the new Natura 2000 preservation measures. The pattern “they”—referring to NPA actors—are the villains, who do not listen and disrespect multifunctional forestry and “we”—the private forest owners—are the victims, who have no alternative and suffer from the imposed decisions; these patterns are present in the interviews with participants as well as during discussions in the cooperation meetings. This pattern has also been reported in previous research stressing that policymakers stereotype private forest owners as ignorant to forest conservation, while forest owners claim to preserve forest ecosystems for future generations (Feliciano et al., 2017).

The opposite is exactly the case in the interviews with state representatives, namely private forest owners are not at all perceived as the victims of Natura 2000; rather they are perceived as part, sometimes root of the problem. Thus, state actors often blame private forest owners for being too stubborn to become aware of this reality and even too old for a paradigm shift.

“You also have to say that most of them are simply old. Of course, transforming is more limited, although it also spills over somehow with the younger ones, but yes... It's a holding on to things.” (Int3).

This statement is an example of how state actors use an antagonizing collective identity to try to delegitimize private forest owners' current attitudes and traditional practices. At the same time, state actors recognize private forest owners as the affected group of the Natura 2000 regulation calling them “the affected” and confirming forest owners' self-perception as victims of Natura 2000. In some instances, state actors argue that forest owners have forced this victim role onto themselves by practicing unsustainable forest management, and now have to address the consequences. Additionally, NPA actors often shift blame onto higher policy levels, in particular the federal and EU levels, and point out that they are under tremendous pressure from above to speed up Natura 2000 implementation on the ground to prevent infringement procedures against the German state.

Blaming and shaming between representatives of the NPA and private forest owner associations overshadow collaboration in the regional cooperation (Table 3). Even the regional manager described to face difficult situations due to his explicit role was to mediate between the antagonizing groups. Interestingly, the regional manager has not been able to facilitate between competing claims or to navigate toward more constructive grounds. He remembers,

“[...] that was also the reason why I was so close to quitting in the first year. The forest owners, that's hard work. They are not easy either. But it's also about their property and I [as forester by training] always have a lot of understanding for them. And they're not so ideological. That's the difference to our authority. They [NPA] are all very ideological. And that's why they get into trouble. If you get in the way, you'll eventually run out of energy, and if you are then supposed to win the trust of the forest owners and to mediate somehow, but the authority keeps telling you “No, you're not allowed to do that' then at some point you'll get fed up.” (Int2).

This quote first shows the difficult role that the regional manager had to fulfill, as being in-between the chairs and neither of the groups trusted him to be transparent and fair. Second, it shows the antagonizing characterization framing, in which even a regional manager has been implicated, leading to an institutionalization of the conflict between the different actor groups, which can be referred to a

mentality or “culture of conflict” in the regional cooperation (Yasmi et al., 2006). Over time, actors in the regional cooperation became accustomed to conflicts in the way this “us vs them” mentality continued to strengthen and became a plausible and accepted part of the regional cooperation. The unresolved conflicts opened doors for further polarization, which some actors strategically exploit to increase the salience of the ingroup and to mobilize their peers (Table 3). One participant reflected on this situation,

“[...] we almost have a camp formation now. On the one hand, there are the people affected by Natura 2000 safeguarding, on the other hand, there is the authority, and then, in between, there is the regional manager, who actually has to try to bring the interests together, to dampen the exaggerated ideas and sometimes also emotions. To anticipate both sides and perhaps also to consider in advance, with a view to the next cooperation meeting, how things can continue.” (Int16).

The on-going struggle in the regional cooperation grounded in different understandings from diverging interpretative frames of reality and a resulting competition and power play over valid rights and wrongs between state actors and private forest owners. Both groups described the situation to be unresolvable, despite recurring interaction and communication during meetings of the regional cooperation. In summary, the regional cooperation is a network of diverse actors who struggle to find common ground in many aspects, while conflicts, mistrust, and suspicion overrule communication as previously mentioned. This is also reflected in the frames that actors use to characterize other participants. The narrative interviews revealed that some actors from the regional cooperation have acquired a real “us against them” mentality and talked in shaming and blaming patterns about others and Natura 2000.

### 4.3 | The regional cooperation as a network

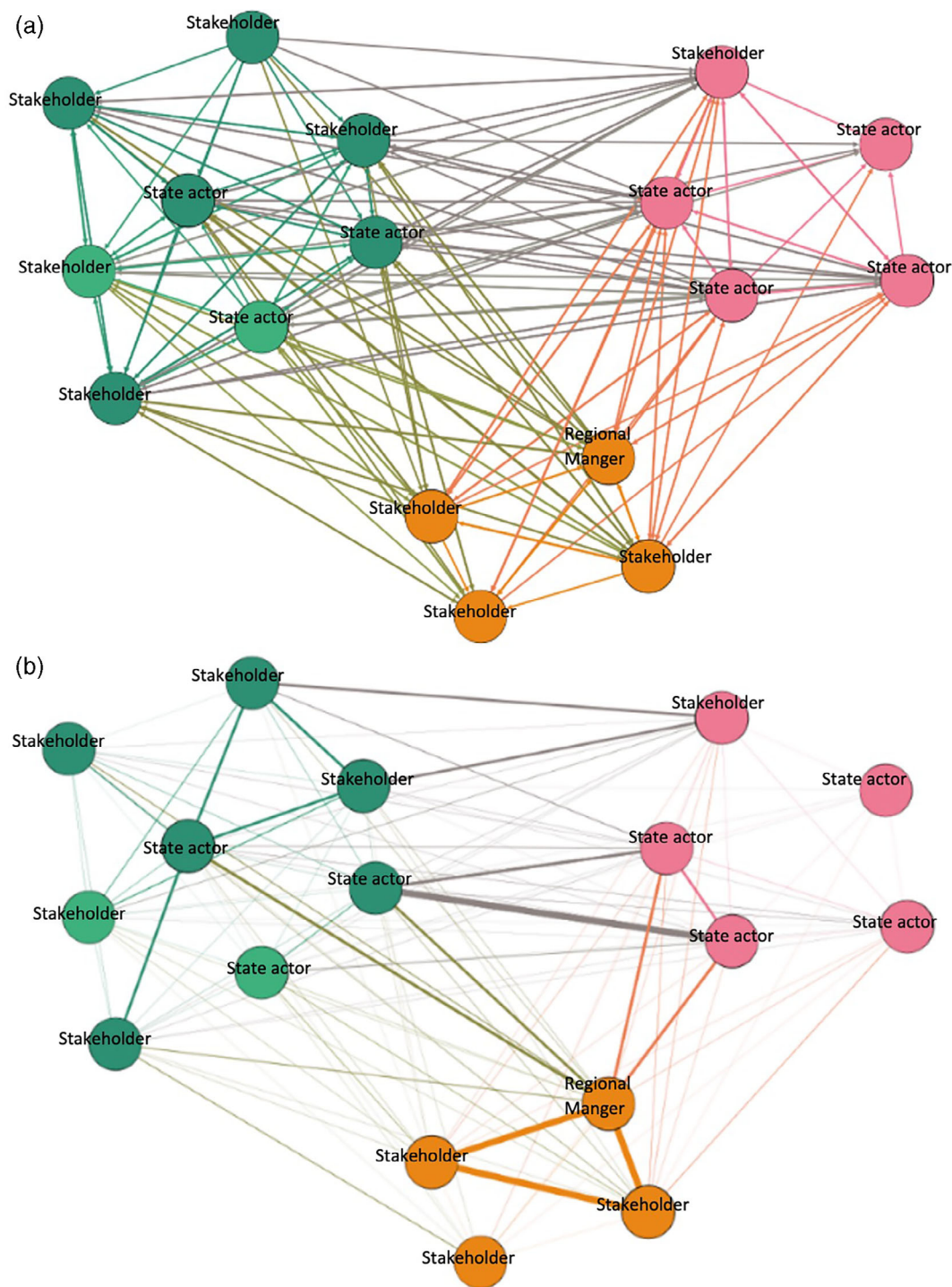
The above descriptions highlight the problematic nature of the Natura 2000 implementation process and the divides perceived by the participants in the regional cooperation. The qualitative analysis led me to assume that the regional cooperation would be divided into two densely connected subgroups, one consisting mainly of NPA actors and the other consisting of private forest owners and other stakeholders, and I expected the regional manager to link these two subgroups. Based on 17 actors (nodes), 206 interaction ties out of 272 feasible interactions in total are actually present, resulting in a high-network density of 76% (Figure 1a). All participants from the regional cooperation are embedded in dense relational structures and they know and often interact with each other (Figure 1b). Three clusters were identified where actors interact proportionally with each other (Figure 1, green = Cluster 1, pink = Cluster 2, and orange = Cluster3); however, there were no enclosed groups

(i.e., disconnected clusters) indicating that the reported exchange and communication between the participants from the regional cooperation were active. Clusters are heterogeneous. NPA actors, other state actors, and the stakeholders are distributed equally over the three clusters and all three groups have similar interaction patterns. Besides, they have many relationships with other actors from the two clusters (Figure 1). There is not one coordinating actor taking a central position in the network; rather several coordinators divided over the three clusters, who interact frequently with actors from within and others outside of their cluster. The social network structure strongly suggests that the regional cooperation as a co-management network plays an important role in sustaining reoccurring interaction and communication between members of the regional cooperation.

## 5 | DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to explore the cooperation-conflict dynamics and their effects on co-management. I explored the narratives and characterization frames that participants in the regional cooperation used and compared this to the social structure between them. The qualitative analysis suggested entrenched divides between Natura 2000 proponents and opponents, which even a regional manager, hired specifically to mediate between these groups, could not break. Instead, the regional manager was stuck on the fire line, which is discussed more in depth in Koch et al. (2023). The “social responsibility of private property” narrative competed with the “imposed restrictions and losses” narrative to gain power and competency in deciding what sustainable forest management means and what adequate conservation measures under the Natura 2000 policy would be. No consensus could be reached among the actors of the regional cooperation, even though collaborative theory included in co-management frameworks claims to increase mutual understanding and shared commitment through regular exchange (Emerson et al., 2012).

Moreover, the two narratives included antagonizing characterization frames that actors used to legitimize the ingroup as the hero or victim and discredit outgroup actors as the villain. Over time, this led participants to develop an “us versus them” mentality and to an institutionalized conflict that has not been resolved thus far. This conflict reflects and confirms previous empirical insights into the challenges of implementing Natura 2000 in forest management (Borrass, 2014; Kati et al., 2015). In the German discourse on the adaptation of forest management to climate change, for example, further narratives on proper forest management have recently clashed with each other under the paradigms of retention versus economic versus multifunctional use of forest ecosystems (Cosyns et al., 2020). Conflicts arise when those different forest management paradigms clash, competing over sustainable forestry pathways and highlighting disputes over social recognition of informal and cultural norms taken for granted (Popkin, 2021; Winkel et al., 2015). The German forestry sector is seemingly divided in the aftermath of recent crises events, such as severe forest fires and forest dieback, which is highly likely to have influenced the interaction in the regional cooperation. The unresolved



**FIGURE 1** (a) Visualization of the regional cooperation presenting actors as nodes and edges as interaction (1 = yes, 0 = no) and in (b) weighted edges as frequency of interaction. Thickness of edge means that actors more often interact with each other (daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, once in 6 months or once a year).

Natura 2000 conflict offered a window of opportunity for the participants to discursively reinforce polarization, enhance the salience of their characterization frame and bolster their group identity.

Surprisingly, the survey results provided a quite different picture of the regional cooperation as a co-management arrangement. The polarization into two adversary groups did not resonate with

the reported relationships between the participants. On the contrary, findings point to a dense network structure in which regular exchange occurs between heterogeneous subgroups. At least one other state actor (representative of the Chamber of Forestry) next to the regional manager takes a central position as a mediator. Thus, considering the social structure, the regional cooperation is far from a camp formation



and the social world is not as pigeonholed as it appears in the participants' narratives. This highlights an important inconsistency between the relational and narrative mechanisms underlying this conflict, and between the qualitative and quantitative data. The conflict is discursively reproduced, as members of the regional cooperation constantly ignite, trigger, and escalate the conflict over Natura 2000 forest management and thus create the impression that the regional cooperation is characterized by polarized relational structures. On the one hand, private forest owners use their narrative to address a contested inequality and legitimize its existence. On the other hand, NPA actors play with moral frames in their narrative and try to depoliticize perceived inequalities, rather highlight privileged rights of private forest owners. However, at the same time, communicative and trust relations between all actors are maintained. Instead of being transferred into the relational structures, it can be summarized that the conflict over social status and the power of interpretation remains a symbolic dispute between members of the regional cooperation.

Speaking of power, studying narratives, identity constructions and ingroup versus outgroup behavior in co-management surely requires a discussion of power dynamics and how actors in co-management use language to influence the process and to demonstrate power. Ideal-type co-management frameworks usually emphasize only the merits of collaborative outcomes rather than including assumptions about politics, despite much of the empirical literature emphasizing the struggles between influence and control versus empowerment (Turnhout et al., 2020). Power dynamics arise where mismatching rationales underlying collaboration or the mode of governance occur and where different power understandings of actors collide. Some co-management arrangements are more empowering than others are and this is reconstructed in the narrations (as lived experiences) of actors. They can either highlight positive perceptions of collective power (power with), or empowering (power to), while also stress negative perception of coercion and manipulation (power over) (Partzsch, 2015). In the case study, actors are interested in being part of a platform where they can influence the Natura 2000 implementation process. Making the fictional camps from their minds become real and exploiting windows of opportunity to reinforce this were strategies for prolonging the implementation process. If power is perceived to be imbalanced, the extent to which actors are willing to collaborate in co-management processes is limited (Armitage et al., 2009; Reed, 2008). In the case study, this became evident when private forest owners started threatening to withdraw from the process, because they felt that their perspectives were not being taken seriously, but deliberately excluded from important decisions, for example on the decree. From a retrospective perspective, is this strategy truly a sign of private forest owners being powerless? It can be interpreted as an example that private forest owners in fact are quite powerful, because place-based, meaningful Natura 2000 implementation would end once they withdraw from co-designing Natura 2000 management plans. It points to manipulation strategies of power toward the perceived outgroup (power over NPA), rather than contributing capacities for collective power (power with) (Partzsch, 2015). Most scholars assume that trust-building exercises are the most appropriate solution for

balancing power asymmetries. However, fostering trust might be very ambitious in "culture of conflict" settings and therefore cannot be applied as a blueprint to every context (Armitage et al., 2011; Lumosi et al., 2020). The type of conflict supposedly also influences the emergence of collective empowerment. The "us-them" type of conflict is about perceived inequalities and people involved in this type fight for a social recognition of diverse knowledge and perspectives. This type of conflict is similar to what Winkel et al. (2015) call the idea and knowledge-based type of conflict. Trying to achieve collective empowerment with a consensus-oriented process integrating diverse types of knowledge is however questionable, since all parties need to be willing to make compromises. As this study shows knowledge and ideas are related to normative viewpoints that are again linked to social identities that are hard to be compromised if one fights for their recognition.

The social network analyses showed that one should not give up hope in regard to co-managing. It is probably less about the "how" but the "who" can acquire joint gains. Central actors in co-management arrangements who function as collaborative leaders can facilitate the openness of the process and exert pressure on those participants, specifically on those who act unfairly (Ardoin et al., 2015). Collaborative leaders could also take action against polarization entrepreneurs that discursively exploit windows of opportunity as in the case study. Furthermore, leaders can facilitate the retelling of narratives attached to a shared meaning of place. In particular, the transformational leadership type is related to reframing and involves influencing others' perspectives through narratives to increase commitment to a shared cause (Foldy et al., 2008). Colvin et al. (2015), for instance, suggest the formation of a superordinate. We identity built on inclusiveness and common grounds. Moreover, embeddedness in dense reciprocated trust relations with others helps transformative leaders to reframe dominating narratives (Gorris & Koch, 2024). In the case of Natura 2000 forest management, a vision for the future of European forest management in light of rapid environmental changes could help move from divides (Popkin, 2021). Alternatively, integrated landscape management could provide a broader frame in which Natura 2000 areas as green infrastructure elements increase the region's resilience in addition to other key elements (Mann et al., 2018).

The inconsistency in the interpretation of the results points to the importance of both research methodologies and speaks for the application of mixed method research designs to cross-check research findings. The qualitative approach would have led to the conclusion that the regional cooperation as a co-management arrangement is highly ineffective, whereas findings from the social network survey suggest that the structural pattern of the regional cooperation provides a good basis for trustful communication neglecting the politics behind Natura 2000. To obtain a more nuanced understanding of the intangible aspects of engagement processes, qualitative research approaches are often an eye-opener and enable researchers to collect the single puzzle pieces (the subjective meaning makings from individuals) from all participants and then put them together into a complete picture of the collaboration as a whole (the collective meaning



making). Additionally, the complexity and contextuality of social-ecological research calls anyway for interdisciplinary research approaches and multiple perspectives in analyses (Bercht, 2021). Being reflective and reflexive as a researcher is a key principle for pursuing a narrative approach in research (Savin-Baden & Major, 2012). Each narration that participants told me is a personal experience of what happened, grounded in their own worldview and subjective perspective. Thereby, participants naturally do not only report what exactly happened (insofar this is ever possible), but rather perform the role of a storyteller to convey their perspective on meaning, relevance and importance. In order to obtain robust case study findings, I put on a systemic lens on the case and compared the different narrative interviews, observations, and informal talks with each other in a meticulous way. That included a reflection also my own research stance and what influence it might have had on the results.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

Healthy ecosystems and the protection of natural habitats for endangered plant and animal species are key and main objectives of the EU Habitats Directive and subsequent strategies (e.g., EU Green Deal and EU biodiversity strategy 2030). Co-managing partnerships between local state and non-state actors present an alternative to centrally steered governance for overcoming implementation challenges and finding adequate place-based conservation measures. However, many environmental co-managing processes are characterized by political struggles over meaning, blurring responsibilities and entangled cooperation-conflict relationships. Based on Chantal Mouffe's agonistic theory and conflictual consensus, it is probably useful in future to recognize and reframe conflict as a valuable dynamic that, if used productively, can lead to innovative and transformative solutions (Mouffe, 2021). Different forms of trust are important among participants in a co-management process (Stern & Coleman, 2015), but difficult to foster in contested, emergent settings (Gorris & Koch, 2024).

This study falls into the large field of conflict research, where the polarization of society as a whole is currently heatedly debated. A deep societal polarization is being emphasized more and more frequently, whether in everyday anecdotes or in the media, although latest research findings paint a rather blurred, more complex picture. Instead of a black and white division between two large groups, a fragmented landscape of conflicts with varying degrees of dispute exists as well as a large amount of consensus in different topic arenas (Mau et al., 2023). This study—even though being a single case study about collaboration on the micro level—contributes a depth of empirical analysis to this debate and suggests as well a rather cautious use of the term polarization. Although loud politicization on the fringes has reinforced the impression that society is becoming polarized, it only does so in the case of particular trigger issues that are particularly emotionally charged (Mau et al., 2023). In this study, the trigger issue was the private forest owners' fear of losing their autonomy and self-determination that fueled the conflict. Furthermore, this study demonstrates that research on environmental collaboration and conflicts

is a balancing act to be able to correctly assess the situations of the conflict parties. It proves to be important for further social network research to differentiate between a symbolic conflict that is being fought in order to gain authority and sovereignty and a conflict that impacts social structures between groups of people. Further investigation on the mechanisms underlying cooperation-conflict dynamics in collaborative governance arrangements is needed to better anticipate intergroup or interpersonal disputes and navigate those into productive collaborative endeavors. In future, the politics inherent in collaborative processes—conflict and power dynamics—should have a more prominent role in conceptual frameworks about collaborative governance and co-management.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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