Opportunities for increased conflict management

–   A cross-case study at the Department of Policy Implementation at the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency

Linda Norrman

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Abstract

Managing conflicts within natural resource management is important for sustainable development, and one of the issues within this research area concerns key relationships between agential and structural factors, desk officer's space of action, and competence. Based on Hay's Strategic Rational Approach, this study analyses the opportunities and challenges in the management of natural resources at the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency. The analysis is based in a qualitative and abductive methodology with 13 interviews from purposively sampled cross cases. Key conclusions include that desk officers perceive expert knowledge as the key competence for successful natural resource conflict management; how an experienced gap between hierarchical levels and horizontal functions results in non-optimal communication and inhibited learning; how strategic actors can influence structure and how structure influence the decisions of strategic actors.

Key words: conflict management, agency, structure, practice, knowledge.

Acknowledgements

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Abbreviations

CBA – County Administration Board
NRM – Natural Resource Management
SEPA – Swedish Environmental Protection Agency

Translations

Administrative function - kansli
Desk officer – handläggare
Director general – generaldirektör
External analysis - omvärldsanalys
Head of department – avdelningschef
Head of section – sektionschef
Head of unit – enhetschef
High-priority issue – prioriterad leverans
Issue, case – sakfråga
Land ownership rights - markägarrätten
Management team – ledning
Order of presentation/presentation order - dragningsordning
Policy Implementation Department – genomförandeavdelningen
Process of matters – handläggningsprocess
Unit of Compliance, Grant and Enforcement – enheten för förvaltningsärenden och bidrag
Unit of Guidance on Inspection and Enforcement – enheten för vägledning
Unit of Legal Affairs – enheten för prövning och regelgivning

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1 The start

"We need to investigate what competence is required". "We are recruiting new staff, so let's make sure we hire the right people". "Let's have a workshop", they said. The workshop was held and a list was formed. Natural scientists were required. And statisticians. And legal experts. And maybe natural scientists, but with legal competence as well? Someone said, "hey, remember that we do work with changing people's behaviours". "Yes, that's true!" And the note "someone who can deal with people" was added as a bonus.

This situation took place in mid-December 2014, at the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) in Stockholm. At this time, I had the fantastic opportunity of doing an internship at SEPA and was invited to the workshop. The situation caught my interest immediately – what mechanisms made the group perceive one thing as a formal competence and another as "a bonus"? Or in other words, natural science was a formal competence, but communicative competence was not.

The workshop triggered my curiosity when filtering my observations through my education in conflict management. I saw that communication was not perceived as a central aspect of natural resource management, despite having been taught that when managing natural resources, conflicts occur and must be managed. And when managing conflicts, one's communication skills are put onto the line. So, how are conflicts within natural resource management (NRM) managed at the SEPA? And do the same perspectives on communication occur also here? With these as my starting thoughts I began my inquiry.

1.1 Introduction

The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency's (SEPA) is an administrative authority with the task to monitor the state of the national environment and to develop and implement the Government's environmental policy (SEPA, 2014). Being responsible for many of the core activities within Swedish NRM, SEPA is a key player for enabling a societal sustainable development. In addition to the focus on nature, a great amount of the SEPA's activities are related to human-nature interactions, many times complex issues with an inherent risk of conflicts (Sidaway, 2005:xiii). Several authors argue that today, conflicts within NRM are unavoidable because of the very differing and competing interests, perceptions and ideas amongst stakeholders about how NRM should be carried out (Buckles 1999; Castro and Nielson 2003; Yasmi, 2007) and that there is no NRM-setting free of conflict (Daniels and Walker, 2001). Managing these complexities has become a key-success factor in policy implementation and development (Raitio 2013:97) and conflict and conflict management is nowadays an inseparable aspect of NRM (Yasmi, 2007)

However, managing conflicts does not equal to avoid them. Conflict theorists emphasise that constructively managed conflicts can trigger learning and improvements in resource governance and thereby catalyse positive social change (Ayling and Kelly, 1997; Walker and Daniels, 1997; Doornbos et al., 2000 in Yasmi, 2007). Conflicts are a delicate matter since a poorly managed NRM conflict can be pervasive, widespread and sometimes extremely destructive (Buckles, 1999; Lewicki, 2006, Sidaway, 2005). A destructive context is characterised by decreasing levels of trust between actors and for the process. This can have severe negative impacts on the development of the conflict and in the long run on the policy implementation (Raitio, 2013; Lewicki 2006; Hallgren & Ljung 2005).

All these situations where the SEPA are intertwined with other actors become arenas for interaction where the legitimacy of decisions is assessed. In policy implementation, legitimacy is a core element (Biermann & Gupta, 2011) and defined as the normative belief held by actors that a particular rule, institution or order ought to be obeyed (Bäckstrand, 2006 and Tyler, 2006 in Raitio & Harkki, 2014). For the governance system, legitimacy becomes a question of balancing efficiency and democracy because; according to Raitio & Harkki (2014:282) "the extent to which the governance system achieves equity between multiple perspectives through democratic processes affects its legitimacy". Legitimacy can further be tied to transparency of the decision-making process, provision of information, and inclusion of minorities (Bekkers & Edwards, 2007 and Risse & Kleine, 2007 in Raitio & Harkki, 2014). For contemporary environmental policy, legitimacy is of importance to the governance of public goods, i.e. something that belongs to everyone and should have equal distribution between generations (Elling, 2008). As previously described, governance of the environment implies dynamic human-nature relations, often involving moral and ethical aspects. Simultaneously are the authorities under pressure to make financial rationalizations on environmental issues, making the authority intertwined in multiple contradictory demands where estimations must be made (Elling, 2008:256). These estimations may suffer from legitimacy problems. According to Elling (2008) the legitimacy problem can only be resolved by including the citizens in the decision-making process prior to the decision.

Poor policy implementation may question the SEPA's reputation and damage its relations with other actors. Therefore, one of the biggest challenges in NRM and SEPA is how constructive aspects of conflicts are nurtured and the destructive ones minimised (Yasmi, 2007). For SEPA, constructive conflicts have the potential to stimulate new ideas for a sustainable future; they can enhance the professional development and increase motivation for the staff through the new learning opportunities and innovation processes they facilitate. Additionally, the constructive environment creates an arena where SEPA can further develop its relation to the society and bring policy closer to the citizens. On the other hand, the ignorance of the power in destructive conflicts can cause large inefficiencies in the use of Swedish taxpayers' money and ultimately the environment.

1.2 Problem description

The individuals at SEPA with the ability to create the conditions for conflict management are those involved in the policy implementation – the desk officers and directors. Thus, their skills, their space of action and their definition of the situation play a substantial role for the development of the conflict, and ultimately the effectiveness of environmental policy implementation. These actions occur in a governmental authority – an organisation characterised by bureaucracy, processes and laws (Johansson, 2007) and the corresponding application of public authority.

SEPA holds one of the most central roles in Swedish natural resource management. Therefore, ways to improve their environmental policy implementation, as well as capacity to formulate and interpret policy in order to incorporate the interests and needs of diverse groups, are central for achieving a sustainable future. Consequently, it is highly relevant to understand the reality and perspectives of the employees, dealing with environmental conflicts, in order to be able to increase the SEPA's management ability. To make progress, there has to be a gain of understanding which agential and structural factors affect the possibility to deal with conflicts in a constructive way and furthermore how these factors influence each other.

2 Aim and research questions

This study aims at understanding the factors that effect SEPA's ability to manage natural resource conflicts. The overall research question is: how do prevailing inter-organisational structures influence the desk officers' practices and space of action related to conflict management? A dynamic theoretical view on the issue of structure and agency is applied to answer the following sub-questions:

- *Which is the experienced key competence for desk officers to successful natural resource conflict management?*
- *Which are the desk officers' perspectives on challenges and constraints related to the conflict management?*
- *Which best practises are there on natural resource conflict management within SEPA?*

This study tries to answer the above questions by exploring the experiences of desk officers involved in diverse natural resource conflict situations, all specialised in their respective issue. Additionally, NRM conflict research is primarily built on individual case studies, generating deep knowledge about specific situations but poor knowledge of potential general and underlying causes of the conflicts (Castro & Nielsen, 2001, Yasmi, 2007). By focusing on different conflicts within one administrative body, the study bridges that gap by combining social psychology, political science and environmental communication within the context of NRM. Consequently, the desk officers' experiences of and perceptions on managing NRM conflicts are explored. This will give new knowledge, not only for the SEPA itself, but also for the whole research community of environmental communication.

3   Theory and previous research

This section presents the fundamental theoretical aspects from where the study is developed. It touches upon the concepts of conflict, communication, communicative competence, conflict capability, agency and structure.

3.1   Conflicts

To understand the role of conflicts within NRM it is useful to distinguish between dispute and conflict (Raitio, 2008:15). Disputes are short-term disagreements that in most cases can be resolved or settled through the use of proper methods (Putnam & Wondolleck, 2003:35ff). Conflicts go beyond material incompatibilities; they arise at a deeper cognitive level where e.g. values, previous relations between the disputing parties (trust) and power play important roles (Glasl, 1999; Sidaway, 2005; Yasmi, Schanz & Salim, 2006; Ångman, Hallgren & Nordström, 2011). They start with a material incompatibility and by the presence of the contextual factors described above, and can gradually become more intense (Yasmi, Schanz & Salim, 2006). Conflicts are dynamic and can escalate.

To cope with conflicts, there are two main approaches; conflict resolution and conflict management. The promoters of conflict resolution stress that conflict is bad and dysfunctional and hence advocate resolution, e.g. by signing a contract (Yazmi, 2007). Conflict management puts emphasis on "situation improvement", where management is about making progress, rather than success. Management is defined as "the generation and implementation of tangible improvements to the conflict situation" (Daniels & Walker, 2001:35). Due to the complex composition of different elements that a conflict holds, each conflict requires its specific management-strategy that takes notice to the importance of trust, power, values – and not to forget, emotions (Carpenter & Kennedy 1988; Daniels & Walker 2001; Sidaway 2005)

A constructive development, i.e. constructive controversy, is possible when the conflict occurs in a cooperative environment where everyone tries to work for a common goal which means that they agree that they disagree and try to jointly improve the situation (Johnson et al. 2006, Deutsch 2011; Krauss & Morsella 2006). One of the most prominent factors for cooperation is trust (Lewicki, 2006), sometimes described as "the glue or lubricant of co-operation in modern societies" (Misztal, 1996 in Raitio, 2013:7). If trust is violated, regardless of if it is trust to person or the situation, subsequent trust and cooperation are lowered, creating a more destructive situation (Lewicki 2006, Hallgren, 2003; Hallgren & Ljung, 2005). This ends in a destructive controversy, which occurs in a competitive

environment where the actors fight to win and inhibits communication between the actors as well as the friendliness and the willingness to help each other to find a solution (Deutsch 2011; Carpenter & Kennedy 1988). Repairing trust may take long time and is a process that sometimes faces challenges with our short-term perspective society (Lewicki, 2006).

3.2 Communication, communicative competence and conflict capability

Communication is an important part of conflicts and their management. To build trust and foster a cooperative environment for conflict management require communication and communicative competence (Hallgren & Ljung, 2005). In this study, communication is treated as the interpersonal creation of meaning and the tool for how individuals actively shape our understanding of the world and orients us within it (Cox, 2013; Hallgren & Ljung, 2005). This extends beyond defining communication as a linear transmission of information from a source to a receiver, e.g. Shannon & Weaver's model of communication (in Cox, 2013). Communicative competence for desk officers within NRM refers to their ability of being external facilitators, i.e. the ability of aligning the multiple perspectives within a conflict to turn counter forces into driving forces. It is about facilitating space of action for actors involved in a situation characterized by insecurities and complexity, while stimulating a solutions-oriented mindset to overcome the polarized positions typically present in a conflict (Hallgren & Ljung, 2005).

Communicative competence can be practiced on individual, group, and organizational levels and an organisation's ability to manage conflicts constructively depends on the conflict capability of its employees. The communicative competent actor needs a toolbox enabling adaptation to each specific conflict situation (Hallgren & Ljung, 2005). One important tool is collaboration, which according to Walker (in Cox 2013:112) constitutes: "constructive, open, civil communication, generally as dialogue; a focus on the future; an emphasis on learning; and some degree of power sharing and leveling of the playing field". Collaboration is the most important method for creating common learning, the central concept for achieving a sustainable development, according to Hallgren & Ljung (2005). Common learning is the ability to handle knowledge, values, uncertainties, and conflict as a group. This definition can briefly be defined as social attention (Hallgren & Ljung 2005:70). Treating environmental communication as a tool for creating a common understanding – focusing on social interaction rather than transformation of information – makes [environmental] communication important in environmental management (Hallgren & Ljung, 2005).

One communicative competence-strengthening action for the desk officers at the SEPA was performed in 2007. A letter of regulations from the Government, commanded the SEPA to introduce a competence development program on dialogue, local participation, local management and conflict management during 2007 (SEPA, 2008). This was a consequence of 2000 and 2001 policy, where the Government praised the importance of local participation within NRM. The program was designed, run and evaluated by Westberg, Hallgren & Setterwall (2010) at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences. They (2010:227) claim, *"Desk officers within Swedish NRM generally lack education and training in communication. Until recently the communicative part of their task has been taken for granted [...] they have focused on fulfilling their role of experts on factual matters"*. The new policy introduced a new role for the desk officers, causing many to express insecurity and feel a lack of appropriate competence. However, the competence development

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program has influenced the desk officers to reflect about communication and increased both motivation and skills to start new ways of working (Westberg, Hallgren & Setterwall, 2010).

To strengthen the conflict-management further, Westberg, Hallgren & Setterwall (2010) recommended SEPA to establish a routine where desk officers and their superiors frequently meet to learn from each other. Openness to the conflict situation enables a higher constructivity since subconscious assumptions about a phenomena or person might be discovered (Glasl, 1999). Furthermore, Westberg, Hallgren & Setterwall (2010) state that sharing experiences from failure and success would increase communicative skills and contribute to the formation of a professional identity where communication is acknowledged as a formal competence. Providing access and encouraging sharing of knowledge and information is an important role for leaders facilitating creative problem solving, e.g. NRM conflict management (Reiter-Palmon & Illies, 2004). These situations require extensive and effortful cognitive processing, support from the organization and its leaders. Proactive leaders who recognize the importance of creative problem solving are more capable of facilitating situations where problems are identified in advance and solutions can be developed before time becomes a critical factor (Reiter-Palmon & Illies, 2004). However, to paraphrase Krauss & Morsella (2006:156) *"Good communication can not guarantee that conflict is ameliorated or resolved, but poor communication greatly increases the likelihood that conflict continues or is made worse"*.

Viewing communication and collaboration as a tool for NRM conflict management has its critics. Druit, Galaz & Löf (in Pierre & Sundström, 2009:125-142) conclude that collaborative methods decrease the involved actors feeling of responsibility and create ineffective NRM. Long-term and stable solutions are difficult to reach because decisions stem from negotiations, characterised by asymmetries in resources and influence. They claim that collaborative methods in NRM are rhetorical tools rather than practical and value adding ones. This critique is important to consider since Krauss & Morsella (2006) say, "good communication can not guarantee that conflict is ameliorated or resolved". Thus, communication and communicative competence as an one-size-fits-all solution to NRM conflicts is naïve and not my intention to suggest with this study. However, the other part of the quote from Krauss & Morsella (2006) says "…but poor communication greatly increases the likelihood that conflict continues or is made worse". And this is the core. Communicative competence in NRM is a question of understanding when and what type of communicative tool is suitable for each situation, not "always use collaboration no matter of what". Obviously, formal expert-knowledge on specific issues is important for a knowledge-leading authority in order to give the correct guidance and take the right legal decisions. But communicative competence does not need to come at the expense of formal expert knowledge. On the contrary, it is when both competences co-exist that complex social-nature interactions within NRM can be managed.

3.3   Moving beyond agency and structure
The above concepts of conflict, communication and communication competence all contain traces of the interplay between agency and structure. The following section will present this duality from a theoretical angle.

Within a structuralistic approach the unit of analysis is systems and structures. Political outcomes, effects and events are exclusively explained in terms of contextual factors.

(Hay, 2002:102). With a structuralistic approach, human action is steered by the structures of the society formed by various social constraints (Giddens, 2001:543). Examples of structures are class, ethnicity, gender and norms. To illustrate, the society is our house and potential action to be taken depends on which doors that are open. Classical theorists with a structural approach are Durkheim, Saussure and Levi-Strauss (Harrington, 2005). Within an agency approach, in contrast, individuals are not created by society – they create society (Giddens, 2001). Agency refers to action, individuals and their personal capabilities. In an agency-oriented approach the unit of analysis is the creation of meaning, the subject and content (Hay, 2002:102). Going back to the house, an agency-oriented study focuses on how the person in the house makes sense of being in the house, how it is interpreted and how it is experienced to be there. Agency-oriented theoretical perspectives are phenomenology, symbolic interactionism and social constructivism (Harrington, 2005).

However, both approaches have received criticism for being too extreme; structuralism is accused for not acknowledging the influence of actors upon the course of political events (Hay, 2002:107) and the agency-oriented theories are blamed to reject the influence of the context on human behaviour (Hay, 2002:110). This dualism between structure and agency has resulted in a stagnated discussion in which one moment is privileged over the other, or simply eliminated. This results in lack of theoretical progress and a low grade of explanation of the complex issues frequent in a global world (Arts et al., 2014; Hay, 2002). However, in the structure/agency- dualism, an embedded ontological relation is present. If structure drives action, then structure determines agency and if agency creates meaning and content, then agency causes structure (Hay, 2002:116). Hence, it is impossible to study society by excluding one of the moments; structure and agency both influence each other and they are, to cite Hay (2002:116), "inherently and inexorably related and intertwined".

To understand this dynamic relationship, Hay (2002) developed the Strategic Rational Approach (SRA), which focuses on the strategic (structured) actor and the strategically selective context. The distinction between structure and agency is only made for analytical purposes (Raitio, 2008:69).

The presumed strategic actor implies a dynamic relationship between the actor (individual or collective) and the context in which he or she finds himself (Hay, 2002). To act strategically is to project the likely consequences of different courses of action in a particular context. Hay (2002:132ff) separates two different strategic moments: intuitive/routine/habitual strategies and explicitly strategic action. The first strategy is unarticulated and based on perceptions of the context and the possible consequences of the action to be taken. The second strategy is also based on the actor's perception of the context, but this strategy is decided explicitly and is thus subject to interrogation and/or contestation (Hay, 2002) Both types of strategic action yield direct effects on the context where the action takes place. When the actor acts, that action develops the actor's awareness of the occurring contextual structures and their possible constraints/opportunities for future action. This is called strategic learning. The strategic learning earned in the moment forms the basis from where future strategy for action is formulated (Hay, 2002). The SRA-approach describes how structure changes due to action from conscious and strategic agents, how agential knowledge is created due to structure and how this new knowledge influences the forthcoming structure, where future action will take place (Hay, 2002).

One team of researchers who have adopted Hay's (2002) dynamic view on structure and agency are Arts et al., (2014) who have developed a practice-based approach to nature and forest governance. To overcome the stagnated focus on structure or agency, Arts et al., (2014:5) have adopted the concept of practice. In similarity with Hay (2002), it is done to

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make clear that social structures, i.e. rules and institutions, do not simply "exist" or influence actors "from the outside", but are produced and reproduced in practice, in the interaction between actors and structures.

Arts et al. (2014:4) define practice as "An ensemble of doings, sayings and things in a specific field of activity". Doings refer to the unspoken such as social and society-nature interactions, tacit knowledge, tacit skills and scripts people follow. Sayings refer to more explicit things such as people and their discursive interactions, explicit rules, norms and uttered knowledge. Finally, things refer to materials and artefacts. Together, these elements are constituted in a "specific field of activity" - the context. (Arts et al., 2014:6). To get a guide for applying the practice-based approach on empirical research, Arts et al., (2014) have developed three "sensitising concepts", or interpretive devices; Situated agency, Logic of practice and Performativity.

The first concept, Situated agency, is very similar to Hay's (2002) concept of the strategic actor, stating that agency is exercised in relation to the context. It assumes that an actor's idea, identity and behaviour are shaped in the context of the social practices in which they are situated. Thus, change cannot be reduced to individual actors (nor humans or organisations) or to the institutional structures they are situated in; also change is constituted in the entwinement of structure and agency (Arts et al., 2014:6).

The second concept, the Logic of practice, acknowledges the role of intentions, knowledge, bodily movements and routines in social action. Logic is seen as internal to practice and not externally imposed by a formal structure, rule or institution. Thus, the logic of practice emphasises that institutions cannot steer human behaviour in a universal way; human behaviour depends on specific socio-historically formed fields of practice (Arts et al., 2014:6).

The third and final concept, Performativity, refers to the power that knowledge and discourses have in creating social practices and to the role that these practices play in sustaining, changing, or even resisting these forms of knowledge production. Or to paraphrase Arts et al., (2014:6) *"Knowledge is performative, because it impacts not just on how we understand the world, but also on how we act upon it."*

4 Methodology

This chapter presents the way the study is carried out, with focus on data collection, sampling and analysis of data. The chapter is closed by reflections on methodological constraints.

4.1 Research design

The study was performed with a qualitative approach since it is the most suitable method to grasp the desk officers' experiences and perceptions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2006). A quantitative approach would have been preferred if the aim was to establish statistical relationships, answering questions of e.g. "how many" or "how much" (Raitio, 2008:77; Trost 2010:32). Thus the second approach was rejected. The scientific working process is abductive, i.e. when the scientist moves between theory and empirics and knowledge is developed during this interplay. Knowledge and context are perceived as intertwined; new observations are always related to the wider context. Abduction starts with consideration of facts or new observations, from where the iterative process of relating theory and empirics begins. The process enables the researcher to gain new insights and refine the theory (Givón, 1989; Alasuutari, 1998:25). The abductive approach enabled me to integrate observations from my 10-week internship at SEPA and to use them as the foundation for my inquiry. The qualitative approach and the abductive process fit well together since they both require and enable an iterative and flexible research process (Voss, Tsikriktsis & Frohlich, 2002).

4.2 Data Collection & Sampling

Semi-structured interviews are the primary data source for this study. In total, 13 interviews were conducted; nine with desk officers, two with superiors (Head of Section and previous Head of Unit) and two with scientists who have been working with conflict management together with the SEPA. Gender is not in focus and all informants are presented as "he".

The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 1,5 hours and were held between 13 February 11 March 2015. Semi-structured interviews enable exploration of new patterns and topics during the interviews (flexibility), while general structure is still maintained (Repstad, 1999; Gillham, 2005). Different challenges and constraints were explored during the conversations, but an interview-guide enabled focus on natural resource conflict manage-

ment. The internship at the SEPA took place between November 2014 and January 2015 and helped to develop research aim and questions, but also functioned as a reference point, i.e. the context from where new elements of knowledge and observations were interpreted and analysed, in line with the abductive approach.

A purposive sampling is applied in the study. It is a non-probability or theoretical sampling technique, suitable for qualitative studies (Eisenhardt 1989:357). Informants with the best knowledge of the research topic are chosen, i.e. key informants (Bryman, 2005:46; Elo et al., 2014:4). The selection of cases was done in collaboration with the Head of the Department of Policy Implementation. Based on the Head of Department's expert knowledge about the organisation and my pre-knowledge about conflicts, seven different areas with known challenges were chosen from which the 13 interviewees were sampled. Experience of working within NRM conflicts was the main criteria for selection together with the intention of understanding conflict management at the SEPA from a wider perspective by not focusing on a single case study, which has been most common method in NRM conflict-studies (Castro & Nielsen, 2003 in Yasmi, 2007). The Department of Policy Implementation consists of three units, nine sections and one secretariat. The sampling covers all units, the secretariat and five of the nine sections and both legal experts and natural scientists are represented in the sample (the main professions at the department). However, the results from the purposive sampling will not be generalizable for the whole population (Bryman, 2005), i.e. all desk officers at SEPA. Instead, it will identify key-issues relevant for understanding how SEPA works with NRM conflict management.

4.3 Analysing the data

With an abductive approach, the analysis has been an iterative process between theory and collection of data. The experience from the internship and theory based on Hay (2002) and Arts et al. (2014) built the base from where the primary research-questions were drawn. Complete transcription of the 13 oral interviews to text enabled both a deep understanding of the data from the high resolution of details and a general understanding from the convenience of analysing the whole data-set simultaneously. Pre-defined coding (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2006) and mind-mapping was used to process the data. The codes were called: "challenges and constraints", "what is working well", "strategies for conflict management" and "experience of participating in conflict management". New themes emerged during the process and the first set of research questions were refined into one overall-research question, anchored in theory and three practise-based sub-questions. Communication, organisational structure and knowledge emerged as key-concepts within the codes ("challenges and constraints", "what is working well", and "strategies for conflict management" and "experience of being within conflict management") and theoretical explanations were sought in order to explain their relations.

4.4 Methodological constraints

The challenges with purposive sampling are difficulties for the reader to judge the trustworthiness of sampling if full details about the informants are not provided (Elo et al., 2004). This is a challenge for this study. Conflict management is an area rich in emotions and sensitive aspects are aired. With respect to my informants, I have decided to not present full details of their positions, nor issues they work with. Providing my informants a safe area was crucial for me to be able to have access to my field (Bryman, 2005). The highest possible confidentiality has been aimed for to manage the trust I was given when

my interview-requests were accepted. Furthermore, non-sensitive handling of subtle information could contribute to a dispute (Raitio, 2008:101). In the chapter on best practices, I have presented the issue after the approval from the concerned desk officers. All together, I valued access to the field and the opportunity to carry out a cross-case study of conflicts above the challenges of purposive sampling.

Another constraint of the study is the represented perspectives. The target was to integrate perspectives from all hierarchical levels, i.e. from desk officer to Head of Department. However, the approached Heads of Sections (except one) and Heads of Unit declined their participation due to lack of time. Interviews with higher managers would have added an extra layer of understanding of the situation, especially to issues concerning leadership.

5 Results

This section presents the empirical findings and is divided into three sections, each corresponding to one of the three sub-research questions 1) Which is the key competence for desk officers to successful natural resource conflict management? 2) Which are the desk officers' perspectives on challenges and constraints related to the conflict management?, and 3) Which best practises are there on natural resource conflict management?

5.1 Expert knowledge as key to success

All the interviewed desk officers express a deep engagement and passion for their work. They strive towards being a good and service-minded civil-servant, serving the society and the citizens and they put a great pride into this. However, sometimes the contact with the society means that there is a conflict to manage. The great majority of desk officers emphasize high expert knowledge as the key to success for NMR conflicts. However, sometimes the contact with the civil society means that there is a conflict to manage. The great majority of desk officers emphasize high expert knowledge as the key to success for managing natural resource conflicts. The expert knowledge is foremost needed to "be able to answer questions correctly based on the right facts". The questions come from private persons, other authorities and companies. The informants stress communicative competence as important, but it is equalized with social skills rather than a formal competence. Many desk officers express that expert knowledge can be increased by formal competence development actions such as courses while social skills are improved by experience and age. Altogether, the desk officers express that they do not experience the intensity or complexity of the conflicts they are involved in as a problem. It is on a manageable level. Hence, communicative competence is of minor importance compared to expert knowledge. This result is slightly surprising since the cases for this study were chosen based on being known as complicated conflicts. Some of the cases have also been in media several times and are researched about because of their complexity. The situation could be explained by role of the County Administration Boards. They come to function as a layer between the SEPA and the public says one of the desk officers, and the conflicts and interactions end up and accumulate there.

However, the data of this study reveals several cases where communication plays an essential role for the desk officers' professional performance. There seems to be a difference between perception and reality. This tension illustrates a paradox: the working situations require professional communication competence as a tool for effective and successful management of natural resource conflicts, but the desk officers do not acknowledge, or are

aware of this need. As long as this is not recognized as a key success factor, the individual desk officers or the agency at large is unlikely to invest in developing this competence.

5.2 Missing internal communication part one - confused bureaucrat lost in organizational change

Many of the interviewed desk officers express frustration over their current situation at work and point at the reorganisation of SEPA as one major factor for this. SEPA was reorganised in 2011 and transformed from a thematic to a process-oriented structure. E.g., instead of everyone working on wildlife sitting in the same thematic unit, they are now separated into different units depending on whether they work with legal affairs, compliance, grants and enforcement or guidance on inspection and enforcement. The Policy Implementation Department became the largest of all departments and its units were divided into sections. Thus, the reorganisation resulted in an additional layer of managers, extending the chain of superiors for each desk officer: 1) Desk officer, 2) Head of Section (new), 3) Head of Unit, 4) Head of Department and finally 5) the Director General (see Figure 1).
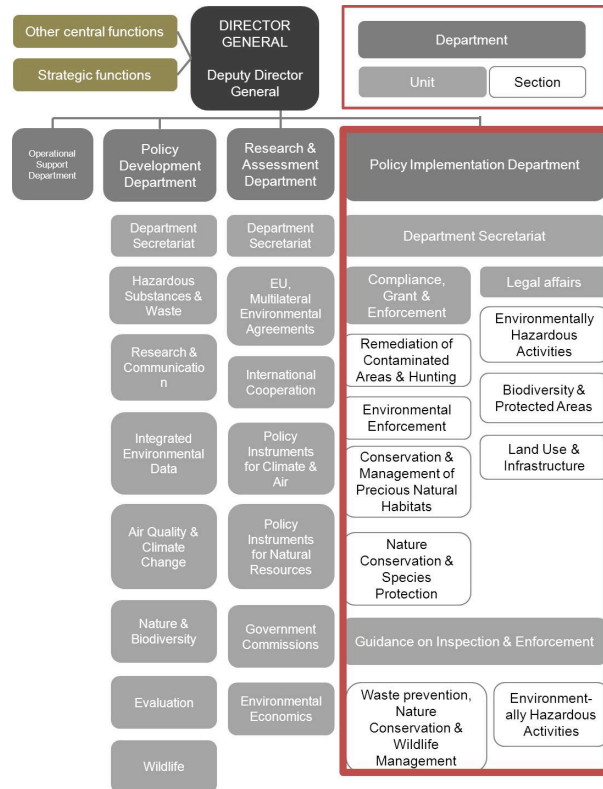
Figure 1. Organisational chart of SEPA. Depicting the Departments' units, sections and how they are related. *Author's simplification.*

According to the desk officers, the efficiency decreased when different units and sections begun to process matters related to the same issue and with the increased number of managers of different ranks involved in the decision-making. *"When a specific case or issue is discussed there can be as many as 10 – 15 managers on all levels involved",* says one of the desk officers. Simultaneously, the managers are perceived to be difficult to access since a large amount of their time is tied up in meetings, causing the desk officers to feel insecure and non-involved in current affairs. This insecurity nurtures doubts on what opinion the SEPA holds in certain issues. One desk officer, who previously was a manager for a while says, *"There were sooo many meetings between the managers. My time as a manager really was a time of enlightenment that they do really talk a lot about issues and questions that we, as desk officers, also should take part of. It is really hard to know what is going on at managers' level. I think that is one of the contributing factors to why it*

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sometimes is hard to register, or understand, the signals from the SEPA. There is like a gap between desk officers and managers"

The expression of having a gap between managers and desk officers signals challenges with the vertical communication within the organization. Another desk officer who processed a company's permission to start a potentially environmentally harming business further strengthens this observation. The Director General and representatives from the company had arranged a meeting, but the desk officer only found out about it afterwards: *"...it created great frustration and uncertainty since I was the one responsible for managing the matter. I mean, what if things had been said or discussed that could possibly influence my processing of the case?"*

The new structure for how to discuss, get advice and take decisions on issues with support from the superiors is experienced to be another contributing factor to the gap. The issue at hand is discussed at each instance, starting at the Head of Section, and each level decides whether the issue should be discussed on the next hierarchical level or not. If a matter goes through all levels, the process may take four weeks. The purpose of this structure is to create an effective procedure to systematically avoid issues of low relevance ending up at wrong instance. However, the presentation order and its preparations are experienced to take a disproportionally amount of time, risking delays in the processing of matters. Furthermore, the presentation structure creates a feeling of separation from their top managers among the desk officers - communication has been isolated to formal channels. This distance causes insecurities both on a professional and a personal level for the desk officers, raising two main questions: "How do I align my processing of matters with the standpoints and opinions of the SEPA?" and, "Am I seen by top managers?"

When the desk officers discuss the SEPA's need for clear opinions, they appear to be referring to their top managers and their leadership style rather than the organisational opinions per se. It seems to be a conflicting view on leadership. The desk officers mostly seek support in factual matters, such as what decision to take, how to interpret some data and how to reply on some referrals, and they express a need and wish for expert knowledge from the leaders. The leaders on the other hand apply a more coaching-oriented leadership, where the desk officer is expected to find a solution rather than the manager commanding an action. The order of presentation and the many layers of superiors indicate a hierarchy-focused organisation whilst a coaching-oriented leadership often belongs to a flatter organisation. Also here there seems to be a clash of approaches. The effect is desk officers who feel that they belong to a hierarchy and seek a more authoritarian leadership with clear answers, but who receive further questions from their superiors, causing dissatisfaction and stress.

In addition to the vertical communication challenges, there seem to be challenges in the horizontal communication as well. It is described as *"the right hand does not know what the left one is doing"* – referring to a non-optimal communication between units and sections involved in the same issue. This is experienced to create a situation where a decision is taken somewhere, but without assuring coordinated decision-making between the other units and sections. E.g. there can be a decision taken about legal affairs concerning an issue, but then this decision does not harmonize with given guidance within the same subject. This situation further enhances the desk officers' experiences of not knowing the opinion of the SEPA in certain issues. However, a similar situation occurred before the reorganisation. Then, a desk officer processed the whole issue, i.e. everything from guidance to legal decisions. Instead of a non-optimal communication between processes (units

and sections), there were challenges concerning the communication between issues. E.g. nature conservation developed in one direction and wildlife and hunting in another, both based on what they thought was the best policy. Hence, the reorganisation is probably not the only factor the internal communication challenges.

Despite of source, the challenging communicative situation fosters different strategies for managing the insecurity of what is said, who says what and what standpoints does the SEPA hold. In the following, these are illustrated in two examples.

The first example is about a very independent desk-officer, from now on named the Lone Ranger. Characterised by great engagement and passion for the work, this desk officer tackles uncertainties about prioritisations and standpoints by the SEPA by not really paying attention to them. He acknowledges that they exist and emphasise that the uncertainties do affect his colleagues negatively and that something has to be done about it, but personally he is so confident with himself and his professional role that he finds support in his own vision and view on how he would like the NRM to function. He states *"I believe that there is a need for clarifying what the SEPA wants and prioritises, in order to increase the experienced security for the desk officers so that they know what to focus on and when, but for me myself... I do not need it"*.

The desk officer literally lives and breathes NRM. His strategy to be able to handle possible conflicts within NRM is to camouflage himself into "one of them". This means, being a hunter and a farmer, living far from the city buzz of Stockholm and the "08-perspective". The desk officer explains his choices of living as a way to gain legitimacy. When he, as a professional, meets land-owners or others affected by NRM he can directly explain that he understands their perspectives since he is in the exactly same situation as them, except for the fact that he is a desk officer as well. Furthermore, he explains that he never becomes a target for excessive provocations or irrelevant questions during a meeting. This is because he often has greater knowledge and insights about the issue at hand than do the landowners who are participating. So, by going beyond the structure of being a bureaucrat, this desk officer has taken natural resource conflict management in his own hands and by a colourful personality he does what he defines as being right, in that very moment.

If the previous example showed one desk officer who goes beyond structure, the other side of the coin is a desk officer being stuck in the structure. In this case, a highly problematic working situation is experienced to have occurred due to uncertainties about what standpoint the SEPA has in a certain issue. The desk officer works in an area characterized by the often contradictive interests of energy supply and nature. Work duties and desk officers represent both interests, but it is experienced that the SEPA has not taken a decision on how to deal with the potential goal conflicts between these two interests/policy goals it represents. The absence of decision puts the discussion on a desk officer-level and it has developed from a structural discussion about societal preferences into an inter-personal conflict between desk officers. The lack of clear standpoints from the leadership promotes a situation where prioritisations about what issues to handle become desk officer-dependent, a situation which is further emphasised by another interviewed desk-officer. He experiences that due to lack of steering, it is the competence and interest of the desk-officers, rather than strategic decisions from the management team, that decides whether an issue is taken care of or not. If that specific desk-officer gets sick or changes jobs, there might as well be no processing of that issue at all. The processing of issues is in many cases experienced to have become an ad-hoc process.

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One situation where the challenging working situation described above does not occur to the same extent is when the desk officers are involved in what is called a high-priority issue. An issue is defined to be of high-priority if 1) classified as having great influence on the Environmental Objectives, or 2) the result is expected to be of high importance for the SEPA's operations or 3) the condition for success is highly dependent coordinated decisions by several parts of the SEPA[1]. Handling a high-priority issue is described as *"it is to be privileged [...] everything runs smoothly. When asking for help, you get help immediately. It is much harder handling my issue now, when it is no longer a high-priority issue. If I am in need of help from a communicator, he or he is most likely very busy with other obligations. It is frustrating. I get stuck in my duties, or at least they take longer time to accomplish"*

The quote highlights a two-faced phenomenon of high-priority issues – they are well functioning as long as they are exactly that: highly prioritised. However, an issue concerning social aspects and human relations seldom has a distinct start or end, a condition that seems to put some desk officers in complicated situations. Most often, the high-priority deliveries end with a list of actions to be undertaken, but then the issue is no longer under high-priority and the desk officers fall back to the situation of experiencing lack of time and resources. Or, as one of the desk officers describes the high-priority deliveries, *"it becomes a fire-brigade action, undertaken when the pot is about to boil over"* and evidently some keeps boiling even after the high-priority issue is ticked of from the agenda.

5.3   Missing internal communication part two - The isolated isles of learning

The informants express that communication in other ways than in the written form is a rarely-used tool for learning at SEPA. The non-optimal horizontal and vertical communication also influences the learning capacity of the organisation from past experiences. All interviewed desk officers hold the opinion that internal communication can be of great importance for their own and others' learning, except for two who never have thought of it as a tool for competence development. There seem to be four factors inhibiting the internal communication at SEPA: 1) feelings of not knowing who is doing what, 2) time and 3) perceptions on knowledge.

First, since the desk officers feel that nobody really knows who is doing what, i.e. who is the expert of which issue, they find it hard to know whom to ask for advice or support. *"We have a situation where the importance of analysing actors and trends outside the SEPA is highly emphasised, but where we do not even know what is happening inside these four walls – what are each of us doing?"* one of the officers says.

Second, when they know whom to ask, time seems to be a barrier for learning. There is simply no time left to assist others after completing their own tasks. One desk officer expresses that the lack of time inhibits the creativity needed to integrate and combine new knowledge with their existing basis of knowledge.

Third, it is common that employees are reluctant to new perspectives and ideas due to them guarding their own expertise. If a suggestion for improvement is presented, it is only accepted if it is 100 % adaptable to the own area or case. Or, as one desk officer presents it,

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[1] Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, Annual Report 2014:7.

the reluctance is connected to how people are used to working: *"We don't learn that much from each other today, or at least I don't know any examples. I guess it all ends up on an individual level; since you work quite a lot by yourself you try to solve messy things yourself as well. You want to do it in your own way"*. Related to this, suggesting an initiative to discuss and learn from each other can be interpreted as rude. This is because the different issues have such different preconditions regarding time, money and what level of escalation the conflict is on, e.g. if comparing a high-priority issue with a normal processing of matters.

The interviewed desk officers share the opinion that better possibilities for desk officers and superiors to meet must be created in order for the process-oriented organisation to reach its full potential. This is perceived as essential since meeting is experienced to be the very prerequisite for knowing, which in turn is the very prerequisite for understanding; *"It is not only about making the managers understanding us as desk officers, we as well must try to understand the managers. We are in this together"*, says one of the desk officers. Also, greater access to tools for communication is indirectly asked for. For example, several desk officers, irrespective of each other, emphasize the project "Dialogue for Nature Conservation" as a good example of a useful learning situation.

The non-optimal internal communication causes missed opportunities for learning, insights and experiences that could be used to enhance future conflict management. Instead, learning becomes isolated isles of performance, risking a situation where processes are reinvented all over again.

5.4   When the wheels run smoothly

Two successful cases of conflict management to draw insights from are the Right of Public Access and Establishing Protected Area on Private Land. The desk officers experienced a well-functioning processing of matters as well as an active work with communication.

5.4.1   Right of Public Access

The core of the tension between the Right of Public Access and the Land Ownership Rights is the question of where one ends and the other begin. This line is long-disputed, recent cased include harvesting of berries for commercial purposes, horse riding and raindeer herding. In late 2012, tensions escalated and SEPA had to react. The strategy on how to manage this complex situation was drafted by the Head of the Department, a dialogue project; "Dialogue about the Right of Public Access". At first, the desk officer felt scepticism, questioning whether discussions were the best way forward. Past experiences from discussions were increased polarization rather than constructive progress. Since the initiative came from a leader high up in the hierarchy whom he trusted, and that he could not come up with a better alternative, the desk officer decided to take a deep breath and give it a try. And, as he said, "it felt a bit exciting – it was a way to learn something new!"

The initiative was classified as a high-priority issue and between June 2012 and March 2013, six full-day meetings with representatives from approximately 20 organisations, such as authorities, landowners, NGOs and economic associations, were arranged. Access to human capital was good. External communication consultants were hired while the project was staffed with a dedicated communicator from SEPA and three desk officers, one with legal competence. The project had a purpose and boundaries, but the participants were free to decide the focus of their meetings within these frames. However, the initiative

did not result in concrete outcomes such as joint recommendations. By taking part of the process, the participants gained increased knowledge on the legal conditions concerning the Right of Public Access and greater understanding for the opinions and values surrounding the issue. These insights made them see the issue of Right to Public Access in a larger societal context; with the positive and less positive aspects it carries[2].

For the specific desk officer, the above experience has been valuable and his working situation has improved significantly, because: 1) he feels supported by his superior and, 2) SEPA was forced into taking a standpoint in complex issues regarding the Right of Public Access. Whenever a tricky question arises, he can find support in the statements. Previously, he often struggled with the SEPA being allocated questions outside its sphere of responsibility, like many of his colleagues still do. E.g. the social conditions for berry pickers, the potential loss of jobs if the establishment of a mine is refused, etc. These inconveniences have decreased after "Dialogue about the Right of Public Access". This case shows that by initiating a communicative action, which clarifies both the standpoints and the responsibilities within and outside the authority, the working situation for the individual desk officer can be improved significantly. This specific desk officer has gained certainty - the same feeling many of his colleagues are longing for. However, the status as a high priority issue and the consequential large access to resources makes it a special case, something to consider when comparing with other cases.

5.4.2   Establishing Protected Areas on Private Land

Another landowner-related issue is nature conservation through the establishment of protected areas on private land. This is an issue characterised by strong emotions, economical values, history and future. The land to be conserved has often been in the ownership of a family for generations, generating their income, their memories and hopes about the future. Thus, the process of making the land a protected area has to be coloured by empathy and a solutions-oriented mind-set, says one of the desk officers who handle these cases. Despite the large risk for complicated conflicts, all the interviewed desk officers within nature conservation hold the opinion and the experience that the system works very well. Three main factors are described as contributing to this a) the delegation of the responsibility for the budget for nature conservation to the Head of Section, the closest superior of the desk officers b) the flip of legal procedure and c) the use of external evaluators. Together they have contributed to a situation with a high degree of trust and a well working communication between the authority and the society.

The delegation of responsibility for the budget for nature conservation is a decision taken in order to overcome a structural challenge with the reorganisation. Ever since the procedure for how to go about establishing protected areas was initiated in the 1980's, it has been the manager closest to the operation that is in charge of the budget. This changed during a reorganisation in 2014 when the Head of Section became the leader closest to the operation, but the Head of Unit still had the responsibility for the budget. In contrary to the intended increased effectiveness the reorganisation aimed for, the leader who by then was in charge of nature conservation was troubled that this would build stiffness into the system of compensation: *"During all years, I've had great influence on the appropriation of land conservation and how it should be used and it is highly important that this will be the situation for my successor as well. Because, when he sits there, in a negotiation with a landowner, the landowner must be 100 % sure that "if the manager in front of me offers*

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[2] Bergeå et al. 2013. Report no:2. Department of Urban and Rural Development. Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences.

me 1 million SEK, then it is 1 million SEK". You see, the Head of Unit or the Head of Department cannot come afterwards and say that no, this is not ok. The leader closest to the operations, which now is the Head of Section, needs to have full responsibility for the budget. Otherwise, that manager becomes a lame duck and that doesn't work."

The quote shows how important trust is in these negotiations and that trust-building and mandate are experienced to go hand in hand. Furthermore, cases about nature conservation are often characterised by quick responses and consequently it is expressed to be potential- ly harmful for the trust if the Head of Section must say that *"no, I cannot give you the money right away – I must present it for my Head of Department first and it will take three weeks, at least…"* Thus, in the Delegation of authority for the appropriation for land con- servation, the responsibility of the budget is delegated from the Head of Unit to the Head of Section. The delegation cuts hierarchical steps, which keeps the decision of compensa- tion close to the landowners and enables the required flexibility.

Flexibility and importance of trust is also appearing in the second factor that contributes to the well-functioning system of nature conservation. If following the guidelines, the legal decision of making an area a conserved area is taken first and the decision about compen- sation afterwards. Law regulates the maximum amount of time the agreement on compen- sation can take. However, negotiating with the concerned landowner(s) can take some weeks to several years and the legal time limit puts pressure on both the desk officers and the involved landowner(s). Now, this procedure is flipped upside-down in order to over- come the negative impact of the time pressure, so that an agreement of compensation is made before the decision about area protection. Giving the landowner(s) more time in the negotiations is experienced to have very positive impact on the process and the chances of finding a common solution.

Within the Establishment of protected areas, SEPA holds two roles – they both define the value of the land and they pay the compensation. Previously, these double chairs were experienced to put the involved desk officers, as well as the whole SEPA, in a complex situation and made both negotiations and the possibility for building trust very difficult. To overcome this obstacle, the use of consultants as external evaluators of the value of the area was implemented (in the beginning of the 1990's). Separating and clarifying the dif- ferent role of valuing and paying is experienced to have improved the negotiations. Ac- cording to involved desk officers, the positive impact is because the landowners now expe- rience that the suggested compensation come from an objective person with high expert knowledge, and not from the state itself.

All together, the area of nature conservation has tried to design a process with the objective to minimise conflicts by giving the negotiator full financial mandate, by improving trans- parency and by increasing flexibility in negotiations on compensation. The result of this is a decreased amount and intensity of conflicts, while SEPA has been more successful in establishing trust.

5.5   Summary of Results

The study reveals that a high level of expert knowledge is perceived as the key competence for successful natural resource conflict management. In contrast, the study uncovers sever- al cases where communication plays an essential role for the desk officers' professional performance. However, there seems to be a difference between perception and reality.

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Regarding challenges and constraints related to natural resource conflict management, the most prominent ones seem to connect to the situation at work. There is an experienced gap to the superiors as well as between colleagues, resulting in a non-optimal communication between processes and an unclear division of responsibility. Together, these factors are experienced to be risks for having issues falling between the cracks as well as inhibiting learning from each other. There are some best practises to learn from, e.g. the Right of Public Access and Area Protection. These two cases are characterised by new-thinking and flexibility as well as an aim for transparency. There are wishes for better internal communication to enable learning from each other, but the non-optimal communication between processes, current perceptions on knowledge and the feeling of being short of time disables such initiatives.

6   Discussion

By focusing on perceived key-competences for successful NRM as well as challenges, constraints and best practises related to the same, a myriad of agential and structural factors have emerged. To fully understand the opportunities for improvement of SEPA's ability to manage natural resource conflicts, these factors must be understood in relation of each other (Hay, 2002). The following chapter presents a discussion based on Hay's (2002) Strategic Rational Approach as well as other above-mentioned theory on conflict management. Organisational structure, communication and knowledge will be discussed under the themes of: 1) A non-optimal internal communication and its risks and 2) Perceptions on knowledge, communication and competence as a barrier for change and 3) Dare to care.

6.1   A non-optimal internal communication and its risks

The non-optimal internal communication gives rise to missed opportunities for learning as well as nurtures insecure desk officers. However, this study is about natural resource conflict management, why does it matter if the desk-officers feel insecure or not? Or how they experience the communication? What emerges from the cases selected for this study, where it is known that present or potential NRM conflict situations occur, are situations where the structure, and the lack of it, puts the premises for a) how and with whom the desk-officers can and do communicate with b) what support they experience to be able get from the managers as well as from each other and c) what issues or cases that are chosen to be processed. In other words, the lack of clear steering facilitates ad-hoc and person-dependent processing of matters. In turn, this give rise to the expressed risk of having issues falling between the cracks, of communicating different messages from different sections and units and of stimulating ad-hoc, instead of strategic, processes for what issues to process and how. Examples of the latter are: 1) issues are chosen depending on the interest of the desk officer, if that desk officer quits or changes responsibility that certain issue will not be cared for, or 2) issues are chosen depending on how urgent they are (concerning upset landowners, time, money), and not with maximum environmental protection as main goal.

All these situations incorporate interaction with actors outside SEPA, making them arenas for interaction where legitimacy is assessed (Bäckstrand, 2006 and Tyler, 2006 in Raitio & Harkki, 2014) Previously, organisations could disconnect their internal functioning from their external relations in the environment because there were few contacts between insiders and outsiders of the organisation (Hatch & Schultz, 1997). However, for an organisa-

tion working with environmental issues and within the political sphere in 2015, the context is characterised by networks (Pierre & Peter, 2000) and administrative fragmentation (Conelly & Smith, 1999), making this interaction both extensive and frequent. Thus, the relation between an organisation's internal function and its external image is nowadays deeply intertwined (Hatch & Schultz, 1997) and a direct consequence is that the legitimacy of SEPA depends on its internal functioning. Since SEPA processes matters regarding a public good, our environment, all estimations they do become objects for legitimacy assessment (Elling, 2008). To gain legitimacy, sufficient transparency of the decision-making process and provision of information must be offered. The study has acknowledged a non-optimal function of processing matters at SEPA, where stakeholders run the risk of being forgotten because their case or question has fallen between the cracks or where they receive different messages from different officers. This influences both the issue of transparency as well as sufficient information and hence, the acknowledged situation might harm the public trust in SEPA and the legitimacy of its decisions. And since SEPA acts within an area of highly, sometimes sensitive issues, as is many of the NRM questions, the fragmentation with different messages and insecurities and loss of legitimacy could act as a seedbed for public dissatisfaction and distrust, the pre-phase of a public conflict (Daniels & Walker 2001; Hallgren & Ljung, 2005; Lewicki 2006). Or, if not the seedbed, the factors might become that last drop of fuel on an already bubbling issue, making it boil out of control. The risk of loosing legitimacy shows that a non-optimal internal communication affects the conflict capability of an organisation, leading to sub-optimal outcomes in conflict management.

However, the chances to learn and improve the situation exist within the organisation. Within the cases of Nature Conservation and Right of Public Access, transparency, inclusion in the decision-making process and sufficient provision of information are all keys to way they run smoothly. Furthermore, both cases apply Elling's (2008) suggestion for how to solve legitimacy problems – namely by including the citizens in the decision-making process prior to the decision.

6.2 Perceptions on knowledge, communication and competence as a barrier for change.

Within the examples of the Right of Public Access, Land Conservation and the desk officers own suggestions on how internal communication, and relations, could be strengthened it is evident that there is not lack of good examples and role-models, rather on the contrary. However, there seems to be a lack of procedure, or structures, that take care of and spread these ideas and experiences - this knowledge - within the organisation. Interestingly, Westberg, Hallgren & Setterwall (2010) drew the same conclusion five years ago. In their study, they evaluated a program for communicative skills development of NRM desk officers at SEPA and County Administrative Boards, which they themselves had developed. They suggested that the organisations should stimulate the establishment of professional "learning teams" at the desk officers' place of work, in order to stimulate continuous reflection and communicative competence development (Westberg, Hallgren & Setterwall, 2010). Furthermore, this is described as an action that could contribute to the shaping of a professional identity where communicative skills are acknowledged (Westberg, Hallgren & Setterwall (2010), in contrast to the situation found at SEPA today. Instead of learning from each other, the current study's results reveal a situation where isolated isles of learning are created. They arise because of the desk officer's feelings of not knowing who is doing what, an experienced lack of time, the occurring perception on knowledge and com-

petence as equal to expert-knowledge and the perception of the risk for being disrespectful if an opportunity for learning is suggested. Hay's (2002) concept of the strategic actor gives some potential answers for why this situation occurs, where both the habitual/routine/intuitive strategy and the explicitly strategy are involved.

As Hay (2002) claims the, intuitive/routine/habitual strategy of action is based on perceptions of the context and possible consequences of an action to be taken and within the context of learning, perceptions seem to be a central aspect of how the actors choose to act. If the desk officers believe that suggesting an initiative to learn from each other is experienced as derision, they will judge the costs and benefits of that action as discouraging. Most likely, the internal sanction for being disrespectful (Heberlein, 2012) will hinder them from taking the action. Arts et al.'s (2014) practice-perspective, gives a further theorisation why this non-optimal learning situation occurs. They argue that knowledge (or what we perceive as real in the world) is performative: it affects not only how we understand the world, but also how we act upon it – exactly as this study shows. It is possibly challenging to suggest a situation where knowledge is perceived as created together (exchange of experiences, adopting the experiences to own area of interest) if knowledge within the organisation is perceived as a fixed piece of material that can be handed over to someone else (expert knowledge, facts).

The situation with isolated isles of learning shows the power that knowledge and discourses have in creating social practices and also the role that these practices play in sustaining, changing, or even resisting knowledge production. Performativity implies that it is impossible to fully separate knowledge and discourse from the practice(s) it describes (Arts et al., 2014). In this study, it means that opportunities for organisational learning and development are missed out on. People are rowing their boats in high speed, fuelled by stress and uncertainty, and piers for cover, support and learning are missed due to no time for anchoring or somebody there to throw you the rope. With Hay's (2002) terminology, the perceptions on learning and knowledge show a situation where agential knowledge is inhibited, rather than created, due to the normative structure of what knowledge is. And if new knowledge is gained about how conflict management best is carried out, this new knowledge is constrained in its use, depending on the normative structure of what knowledge and competence is. The situation exemplifies Arts et al.'s concept "situated agency". The desk officers' agency is exercised in relation to this knowledge-normative context. Here, Hay's (2002) third part of his SRA approach can be applied. It says "[…] new knowledge influence the forthcoming structure, where future action will take place" and this is where the challenge for SEPA seems to be; new knowledge is not let to influence the forthcoming structure.

Furthermore, the desk officers' view on knowledge seems to be very close to assumptions – no one of the desk officers explicitly says that this is how it is, but they feel it might be this way. Thus, uncovering the assumptions about knowledge and learning could function as a way to strengthen SEPA's conflict capacity (Glasl, 1999). Uncovering the assumptions and trying to find a common view on knowledge creates a common goal, an important factor for creating a constructive environment and nurture new ideas. Thus, constructivity is not only something to strive for in the management of external NRM conflicts and its relations (Johnson et al. 2006; Deutsch 2011; Krauss & Morsella 2006) but also something that could enhance the internal situation at the SEPA. This is what Tjosvold (1991 in Raitio, 2008) would describe as a conflict positive approach, namely that by allowing the expression of conflicts and letting them exist it is possible to grasp their constructive potential.

6.3 Dare to care

Although processes and structures often are explained to be the key to a well-functioning bureaucracy (Johansson, 2007), the two selected "best-practice scenarios" in this study (Right of Public Access and Area Protection) show a slightly different reality. Here, both desk officers and managers must deal with structures that work against, rather than for, them. Dealing with them in these cases refers to being able to see how to overcome them, a process of creativity and new thinking - and explicitly strategic action. Hay (2002) describes how structures change due to action from conscious and strategic agents, and the Results show three distinct examples of that: the cases of Area Protection and the Right of Public Access and the desk officer who actively work with reducing the "08-perspective". Here, proactive agents have changed the practices by strategic action and hence they have added new elements of knowledge. And as the dynamic relation between strategic action, knowledge and practices Hay (2002) describes, the new element of knowledge further changes the practises of the desk officers and their colleagues. Let us take a deeper look at the case Right of Public Access.

The case shows an example where the explicitly strategic action (in contrast to habitual/routine/intuitive action) was used and its influence on the structure (Hay, 2002). When suggesting an extensive communication project (Dialogue for Right of Public Access) the Head of the Department carried out an explicit action, open for contestation. For example, the concerned desk officer expressed doubts about the effectiveness of project. The project was carried out, and now afterwards this doubt has changed to gratefulness and a changed view on communication as a potential tool for conflict management. Nowadays, the desk officer uses insights gained from the experience in his work, maybe also opening up for his colleagues to do the same. With Hay's (2002) words, it is shown how a) normative structures about processing matters and communication change due to action from conscious and strategic agents, in this case when the Head of Department introduced the dialogue project, b) how agential knowledge is created due to structure, that is the desk officer gained new knowledge thanks to the structure his superior offered and c) how this new knowledge influence the forthcoming structure, i.e. the desk officer uses insights and new knowledge in his everyday work (Hay, 2002). The normative structure has changed in the sense that a new technique (dialogue) now is accepted instead of dismissed. Taking small steps, making communication a more and more accepted tool, can change the acceptance for communicative actions.

The cases of Area Protection, the Lone Ranger and the Right of Public Access show that institutions do not steer human behaviour in a universal way, exactly as Art et al.'s (2014) concept Logic of Practice defines. The involved desk officers in these three cases are within the same organisation, but by defining a new logic of what should be done they change the practices. They define the situation from their perspective, and the linear top-down policy implementation faces a challenge. The examples show that steering evolves in practice, involving a diversity of actors who act upon the situation "at hand" from their logical assessment. However, going against given structures requires courage, fearlessness and explicit strategic action since it very often is linked to breaking norms, an action frequently connected to internal negative sanctions (Heberlein, 2012). In addition, managers and officers need to do this in a situation where high working load and time pressure are occurring and also sometimes experienced insufficient support from managers, three parameters that seldom stimulate creativity (Reiter-Palmon & Illies, 2004). But, the cases also show that if an agent has the courage and engagement to go all the way and dare to change – he can actually have great positive influence on practices as well as peers and colleagues. By

daring, an individual public official can change parts of the way natural resource policy is carried out.

7   Conclusions

The aim of the study has been to understand the factors that effects SEPA's ability to manage natural resource conflicts, with focus on the desk officers' space of action. A dynamic theoretical view on the issue of structure and agency was applied to the questions *a) Which is the experienced key competence for desk officers to successful natural resource conflict management?*, *b) Which are the desk officers' perspectives on challenges and constraints related to the conflict management?* and, *c) Which best practises are there on natural resource conflict management?* The study finds that expert knowledge is perceived as the key competence for managing natural resources and communication is rarely acknowledged as a formal competence. However, the desk officers face several situations where communicative skills are required, indicating a discrepancy between reality and perception. They show great passion of their work, striving toward being professionals and service-minded civil servants but find their situation at work challenging, mainly by organisational structures. Still, the desk officers hold great will to improve and there are examples where non-optimal practices have changed due to strategic actors. Then new knowledge has been created, further changing the practices. By the use of cross-cases, this study has bridged a gap within natural resource conflict management research, largely consisting of one-case studies. The cross-cases enabled the research to take a step back from issue-specific explanations of conflicts and conflict management to build a broader understanding of the roles of structure and agency. The study has a theoretical implication to the area of NRM conflict research by providing understanding of institutional factors influencing 1) why a conflict might arise and 2) how it is managed by the responsible authority.

When applying Hay (2002) and Arts et al. (2014) to NRM conflict management, these frameworks show the possibilities for agents to change structure as well as how the structures influence on human behaviour – they are intertwined. In line with Arts et al.'s (2014) conclusions, this study questions the linear function of governance processes. Knowledge is identified as important, but it is the *perception on knowledge* that influences policy implementation. Thus, transforming communication into a formal competence cannot be done by neither competence development initiatives (structure) or by some individuals (agency) alone. The real transformation arises when these two are occur conjunctively, i.e. when competence development is introduced simultaneously to an understanding of why it is done and with sensitivity to the existing perspectives on knowledge and competence. Steering must be an internal part of practice. To cite Art et al. (2014:3) for the final time – *"change cannot be reduced to individual actors (nor humans or organisations) or to the institutional structures they are situated in, also change is constituted in the entwinement of structure and agency".*

A growing human population will put natural resources under increased pressure, and thereby likely causing more frequent and more complex human-nature. To improve the environmental protection and increase conflict capability, this study has opened up for further important areas of inquiry. First, legitimacy is at stake when there are challenges concerning internal communication. But, only the receivers of SEPA's services are capable of answering on this question of legitimacy empirically. Switching perspectives and studying the stakeholders' point of view would contribute to a deeper understanding of SEPA's legitimacy. Second, to expand the results from this study, further studies could be done on cases where processes run smoothly. That would enable an even deeper analysis of the interplay between agency and structure, building a better understanding of success-factors. Third, the 21 County Administration Boards covering all of Sweden function as a filter between citizens and the SEPA and often in practice manage many of the NRM conflicts. Replicating this study on them would build a more complete understanding of how Swedish authorities manage natural resource conflicts.

8   References

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