

**Conflict analysis of Võhandu river primeval valley  
landscape reserve**

By

Melanie Olesk

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## DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation has been composed by myself and that the work of which it is a record was performed by myself. The dissertation has not been admitted in any previous application for a degree at this or any other university. All sources of information have been specifically acknowledged.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research aims to analyse the conflict in Võhandu river primeval valley landscape reserve that has arisen from the Environmental Board trying to renew the regulations. The purpose of this research is to establish the causes and effects of the conflict through conflict mapping and analyse the conflicting parties through stakeholder analysis. The methods employed are semi-structured interviews with local landowners in the area, members of the Environmental Board and Estonian Fund for Nature, content analysis of the correspondence between the Environmental Board and local landowners and participant observation from meetings with the Environmental Board. The most active stakeholders in the conflict identified are the local landowners and the Environmental Board. The main cause of the conflict is the lack of trust between the Environmental Board and the landowners caused by insufficient levels of understanding, absence of personal contact between government officials and locals, previous negative experience, passiveness from some landowners, long history, the influence of some locals with an agenda, spread of false information, the complexity of the process and the apprehension of private property rights being violated by state intervention. The effects of the conflict are increased tensions between locals with differing views and between locals and the Environmental Board, and slowing down the process of renewal of regulations which could mean that the regulations are not renewed on time for the obligations from the Nature Conservation Law. However, the effects of the conflict are understudied, since the causes proved to be more complex than anticipated. In order to move forward with the management of the conflict, the personal contact and trust between the Environmental Board and local landowners needs to be addressed.

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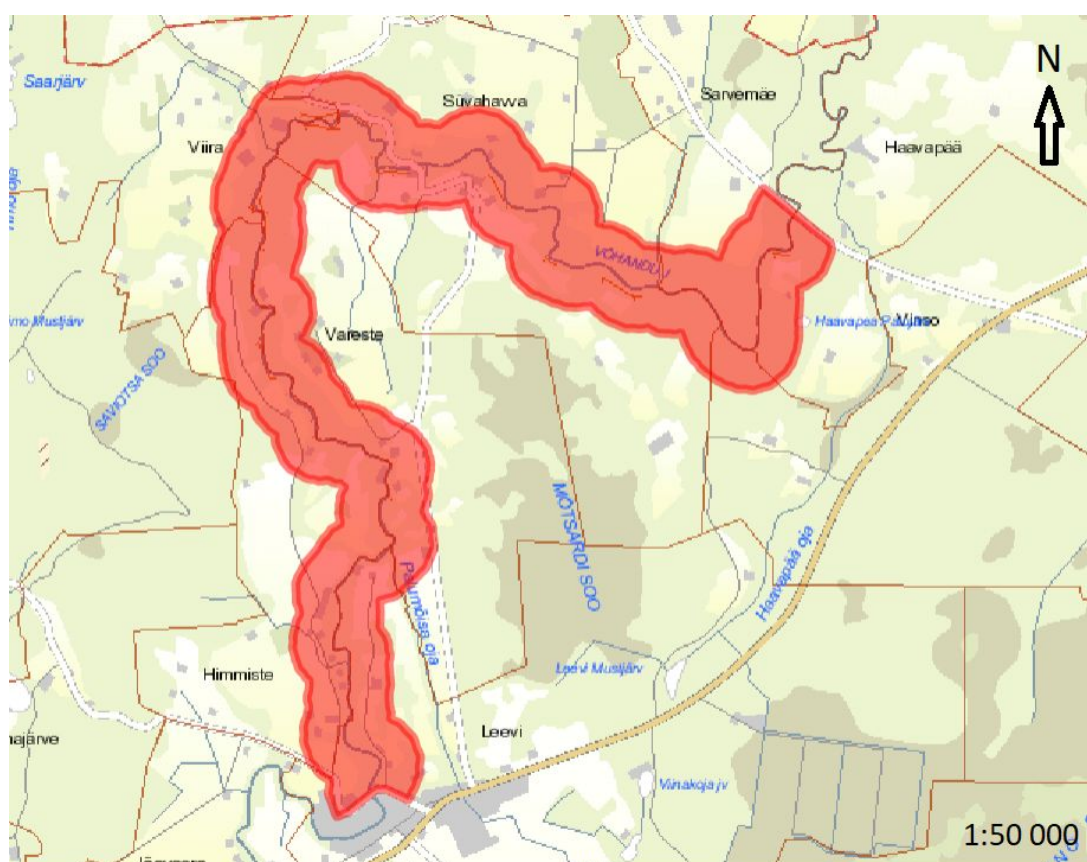
I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr Katrin Prager, for her guidance through each stage of the process. Additionally, I would like to thank my internship supervisors at Estonian Fund for Nature for including me in the case and for their invaluable help and support throughout the research. I am also very grateful to all the landowners in the research area who gave up their time to talk to me and the members of the Environmental Board for their indispensable insight into the research issue. The cooperation of all the participants made this research possible. Lastly, I am very grateful to my mother for her support and my father and sister for driving me around the research area.

## INTRODUCTION

### Background to the case

#### Study area

Võhandu river is situated in South Estonia, starting from the Otepää uplands and flowing into Lämmi lake. It is the longest river in Estonia with a total length of 179.4 kilometers. The study area, seen on Figure 1, is a 12 kilometer long strip of the river from Leevi road bridge to Reo road bridge that was taken under state protection in 1964 as Võhandu river primeval valley landscape reserve<sup>1</sup>, from here on referred to as Võhandu river landscape reserve (Keskkonnaamet, 2015).



**Fig. 1:** Map of Võhandu river primeval valley landscape reserve (Keskkonnainfo, 2019)

There are nine villages in the area (Eelis, 2010) and is mostly situated on privately owned land. The landscape reserve was created to protect the primeval valley sandstone outcrops from the Devonian period. The values listed as under protection in the area are habitats of rivers and streams, biodiversity rich meadows on lime-poor soil, floodplain meadows, springs and spring

<sup>1</sup> Võhandu jõe ürgoru maastikukaitseala

swamps and sandstone outcrops, as well as species whose habitats are protected as part of the landscape reserve: *Cobitis taenia*, *Cottus gobio*, and *Unio crassus*. Additionally, *Alcedo atthis* which is a second protection category species and nests in the area is found there alongside with third protection category species *Thymallus thymallus*. The area of the landscape reserve is 712.6 hectares (ha), with land area of 201 ha and river area of 39 ha. Additionally, in 2008 the primeval valley of Võhandu river was confirmed as a Natura 2000 area (Letter from the Environmental Board, 05.10.2017). The administrator of the area is the Environmental Board of Estonia<sup>2</sup>.

### **Renewal of regulations**

Currently, the old protection regime from 1964 applies in the area, however, from the obligations from Nature Conservation Law, all conservation regimes created before 2004 need to be renewed and coordinated with current laws. The old protection regime will lose force on 1st May 2023 and if new regulations have not been established by then, the regime will apply to points in the Nature Conservation Law paragraph 31 that bans or restricts several economic and recreational activities in protected areas unless stated otherwise in area specific regulations (Interview with the Environmental Board). There has been three attempts by the Environmental Board of Estonia in charge of this process to renew the regulations in the area: the first in 1999, then in 2003 and finally the ongoing process which was started in 2017. Since the majority of the land is owned by private citizens, the cooperation of the landowners is vital in the process. This time the Environmental Board has attempted to involve the local landowners as early as possible in order to avoid a conflict (Interview with the Environmental Board). However, they have received strong opposition from many of the landowners who are against the renewal of regulations and the border of the landscape reserve as planned by the Environmental Board or against a protected area in general. A group of the landowners have hired an attorney to communicate with the Environmental Board on their behalf (Representative from ELF, pers.comm. 04.10.2019). The summary of the history of renewal of regulations can be seen in Appendix 1. The information is based on the correspondence between the local landowners and the Environmental Board and on personal communication with a representative of the Environmental Board.

According to the information from the Environmental Board, the goals of the current renewal of regulations is to protect the same values as listed in the old regime, as well as outline different

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<sup>2</sup> Keskkonnaamet



severity protection zones, regulate forest management, construction activities, land improvement systems, biocide, herbicide and fertilizer usage, the modification of water bodies, water levels and shoreline, driving with off-road or floating vehicles, organising a public event, camping, making campfires, fishing and hunting. Additionally, one the main aims of the renewal is to change the border of the landscape reserve. The current border runs 300 m from each bank of the river and is hard to follow in nature (Letter from the Environmental Board, 05.10.2017).

The process of renewal of regulations as outlined by the Environmental Board (Environmental Board letter, 05.10.2017) is the following:

1. The Environmental Board will organise a meeting with local landowners to discuss the renewal of regulations after which the landowners have two weeks to send in their suggestions about the renewal of regulations and the border of the landscape reserve
2. Taking into account the suggestions, the Environmental Board will produce a intent of renewal of regulations (VTK)<sup>3</sup> which will be sent to the landowners for further suggestions and comments
3. VTK will be sent to the Ministry of Environment to start the procedure for draft renewal of regulations
4. The draft renewal of regulations will be made public and sent to the landowners to familiarise and express their comments and suggestions
5. After the draft is made public, the Environmental Board will organise a public discussion
6. The following procedure of renewal of regulations will take place inside the Environmental Board
7. The regulations will be sent from the Environmental Board to the Ministry of Environment and from there it will sent for inter-ministerial coordination
8. The new regulation will be approved by the government

As of autumn 2019, the process is in the stage of introducing the draft intent of renewal of regulations to the public.

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<sup>3</sup> Väljatöötamiskavatsus (VTK)

## **Opposition from local landowners**

From the experience of the current members of the Environmental Board on this case, the first meeting with the local landowners in 2017 was positive and communication seemed smooth. After the first meeting about the renewal of regulations, the local landowners formed a workgroup that was in charge of disseminating information from the Environmental Board to other landowners and represent everyone's view in the community to the Environmental Board. However, after some time opposition against the Environmental Board and the renewal of regulations emerged from among the landowners, the reasons for which the officials could not understand (Interview with the Environmental Board).

## **The Estonian Fund for Nature (ELF)**

The Estonian Fund for Nature (ELF) runs a LIFE project called Naturally Est that aims to solve and learn from conservation conflicts. Having heard about the case in Võhandu, the leaders of the projects decided to help the Environmental Board as part of the project. The role of ELF is to be a neutral party and a mediator, and the aim is to find alternatives to resolve the conflict (Interview with ELF). Before looking for solutions to this conflict, an thorough analysis of the situation is necessary which had not been done by then. As part of my internship in ELF during summer 2019 and my dissertation project, I am doing a conflict analysis of the situation in Võhandu river landscape reserve.

## **Terms**

Landscape reserve is a state protected area to preserve, protect, restore, research and present the landscape<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, it incorporates the landscape as a whole under protection. The possible zones in a landscape reserve are targeted protection zone and restriction zone. A conservation area is an area assigned for the protection of habitats<sup>5</sup>, therefore, it is more narrow than the landscape reserve with a focus on ecological values (Nature Conservation Law, 2004). In this paper, protected area is used as a general term for both and all other state protected areas.

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<sup>4</sup> Maastikukaitseala - Nature Conservation Law (looduskaitseadus) §28

<sup>5</sup> Hoiuala - Nature Conservation Law (looduskaitseadus) §4.3

## **Aims and objectives**

The aims of this research is to investigate the parties of the conflict and the causes for the opposition to the renewal of regulations expressed by the local landowners. This will be done through stakeholder analysis and conflict mapping. To analyse the stakeholders, I will firstly identify the key parties in the conflict, then examine the organisation of the parties and discuss the values, attitudes and goals of the stakeholders. For the conflict mapping, I will identify and analyse the causes and the effects of the conflict. The data is collected from semi-structured interviews with the local landowners, the Environmental Board and ELF, analysing the correspondence between the Environmental Board and landowners and from participant observation.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Conservation conflicts are defined in many ways and can be framed differently depending on the conflict driver. They include conflicts related to wildlife, resources, land use, conservation governance, development and economics and clashing of values (Baynham-Herd et al., 2018: 181). However, many authors argue that conservation conflicts are ultimately between humans. For example, Redpath et al. (2013) defines conservation conflicts as 'situations that occur when two or more parties with strongly held opinions clash over conservation objectives and when one party is perceived to assert its interests at the expense of another' which emphasises that conservation conflicts occur fundamentally between humans (Redpath et al., 2013: 100). Similarly, Knierim and Jens Nagel's work studies land use conflicts and defines them as 'situations in which different stakeholders or actors claim one and the same conflict issue /.../ with different use or protection goals in mind.' (Knierim and Jens Nagel, 2000: 528). In both definitions, the conflict occurs between humans with different interests and where one or some parties' interests are perceived as threatening to others. Even though in some cases there is direct interactions between humans and other species or their natural environment, these are deemed impacts human activities have, whereas conflicts centre only on human-human interactions (Redpath et al., 2013).

Based on the definitions in literature, I would define the situation in Vöhandu river landscape reserve as a conflict because most of the landowners perceive the renewal of regulations as a possible threat to their interests. For example, from personal communication with a representative from ELF, it appears that the main worries of the landowners are that with the new regulations they cannot rent out agricultural lands to regular farmers but only to ecologically friendly farmers, the price of real-estate will fall, there will be stricter rules for forest management, and during the process, the Environmental Board will enlarge the borders of the landscape reserve (ELF representative, pers.comm. 25.04.2019). Therefore, many of the landowners feel that the Environmental Board tries to assert their goal of protecting the area without regard to the interests of the landowners. Additionally, the conflicting parties have different protection goals for the area in mind which will be further discussed in the paper.

Conservation conflicts are increasingly frequent and intense around the globe (Baynham-Herd et al., 2018; Redpath et al., 2013; Young et al., 2016) and are highly complex involving power relations and changing attitudes (Redpath et al., 2013). Additionally, they are usually more complicated than first seems with ultimate causes rooted in larger societal issues, such as poverty,

imbalances of power and inequalities (Baynham-Herd et al., 2018) and social and cultural histories (Redpath et al., 2013). The complexity of conservation conflicts also comes from them being multidimensional and dynamic (Sidaway, 2005). Wittmer et al.'s paper argues that these types of conflicts have an ecological and societal dimensions. The first refers to the natural base of the conflict and second to the social base, both of which are highly complex and involve a degree of uncertainty (Wittmer et al., 2006). Deutsch (1973) has argued that conflicts are partly about the nature of the dispute but mostly about the relationships between the disputed parties (cited in Sidaway, 2005: 42). Knierim and Jens Nagel have developed this distinction and defined the two dimensions as object and subject sphere of the conflict where the object sphere represents the conflict issue with its legal, economic and social aspects and the subject sphere represents the people involved in the conflict and the perceptions they develop of each other as well as their interactions and communication (Knierim and Jens Nagel, 2000). Furthermore, Niemelä et al. (2005) have identified three dimensions of conflict: substance (how things are), procedure (how things are done) and relationships (how people behave). Even though all these understandings of conflict dimensions are slightly different, they all emphasise the multidimensionality of conservation conflicts and include the ecological as well as human aspects, including relationships and communication, reflecting the complexity and uncertainty in this issue. Because of this complexity and because conservation conflicts can arise for multiple reasons, they need an interdisciplinary approach in analysis and management (Redpath et al., 2013).

Conflict analysis is the foundation for successful conflict resolution because it allows to understand the dynamic processes and the importance of historical events of the conflict to participants (Sidaway, 2005). It also identifies the nature of the conflict, its causes and the positions of stakeholders involved along with the expectations of stakeholders for conflict resolution (Niemelä et al., 2005). Furthermore, conflict analysis helps to make a distinction between parties' interests and beliefs which is useful for negotiations. Sidaway argues that beliefs are formed by ideology and principles which are often not negotiable but can be suppressed in the bid for consensus while remaining unchanged. However, interests can be negotiable as individual's relative priorities may change. Additionally, beliefs provide motives and therefore help to explain interests and may provide a common ground to build trust (Sidaway, 2005).

Redpath et al. have identified six steps in conservation conflict analysis: identifying stakeholders, mapping stakeholder values, positions, attitudes, and goals, gathering all scientific evidence, identifying economic, social and ecological impacts, understanding wider socio-political context and

establishing whether stakeholders wish to discuss with other parties (Redpath et al., 2013: 102). Henle et al. conflict analysis includes the screening of conflict, by evaluating the history, intensity and dimensions of the conflict, and assessment of the conflict by evaluating its ecological, socio-economic and institutional basis (Henle et al., 2008). Similarly to Redpath et al., Sidaway argues that the first level of conflict analysis is stakeholder analysis to identify the interested parties (Sidaway, 2005). Because conflicts occur inherently between humans, it is important to include the stakeholders i.e. possible conflict sides and their interests in the analysis. Often conflicts arise because of disagreements among stakeholders, frustration from being excluded from conservation planning or being disadvantaged in negotiation, or when conservation is seen as threatening to stakeholders' interests (Redpath et al., 2013).

In the following sections the definition and development of the concept of stakeholders and stakeholder analysis will be explored as an essential part of conflict analysis. The origin of the word "stakeholder" comes from 18th century and as stated in Ramirez (1999) meant "a person who holds the stake or stakes in a bet". The concept has developed in multiple disciplines and the most common definition used comes from Freeman (1984) who defined stakeholders as "the people or organisations who affect or are affected by a decision" (cited in Sterling et al., 2017). This definition is used as a base for many current definitions in different disciplines (Reed et al., 2009) mostly in business management, natural resource management, health policy and development. In natural resource management there is no agreed upon definition of stakeholders but most definitions include people or organisations interest or ability to affect - or be affected by - a particular issue, system, project, event, process, or change (Billgren and Holmén, 2008: 553). In most literature, there is a distinction made between public participation and stakeholders (Colvin et al., 2016; Luyet et al., 2012; Reed, 2008) and normative and pragmatic definition of stakeholders (Colvin et al., 2016). Stakeholder are usually seen as representing individual or sectoral interests whereas public participation represent the public good. Additionally, normative perspective on stakeholders may consider everyone who have some degree of interest in an issue, whereas pragmatic definition aims to capture stakeholders with a strategic position for successful outcomes for conflict management (Colvin et al., 2016). In this research the pragmatic definition of stakeholders was adopted, hence the analysis focuses only on stakeholders in a strategic position - the local landowners, the Environmental Board and Estonian Fund for Nature.

Stakeholder analysis helps to systematically represent stakeholders which leads to better understanding of conservation conflicts. Stakeholder analysis is a method for the identification and

description of stakeholders “on the basis of their attributes, interrelationships, and interests related to a given issue or resource” (Ramirez, 1999: 102). It helps to identify the aspects of social and natural systems affected and the stakeholders who should be included in the decision-making process (Reed, 2008) and to unpack the various interests and objectives of stakeholders (Grimble and Wellard, 1997). Stakeholder analysis emerged from business and management studies but is now also used in political science, development and environmental studies (Billgren and Holmén, 2008). In these fields, it is often used to empower marginalised stakeholders which broadened the role of stakeholder analysis and enriched its theoretical basis (Reed et al., 2009). In natural resource and environmental management, stakeholder analysis aims to identify and categorize stakeholders, develop an understanding of the changes or conflicts occurring, establish who has the power to make changes happen and discern how to best manage the issue or resource in question (Billgren and Holmén, 2008).

There is also a high variety of typologies and methods in stakeholder analysis. Ramirez (1999) identifies three phases from Grimble et al. (1995) work: “defining the problem, analysing constraints and opportunities and agreeing on an action plan” (Ramirez, 1999: 104). Reed et al. have summarised the typologies and methods in stakeholder analysis in their 2009 paper. The typologies are identifying stakeholders, categorising them and investigating relationships between stakeholders. Each of the typologies are underpinned by a descriptive, normative or instrumental rationale and can be achieved by various methods, such as snowball sampling or semi-structured interviews for identifying stakeholders, analytical or reconstructive approach in categorisation and using social-network analysis or actor-linkage matrices for investigating relationships. In conflict analysis, Sidaway (2005) has identified consistent elements of conflict related to stakeholders that help to understand it. These are beliefs, interests, level of understanding of the issue, relationships and procedures of decision-making (Sidaway, 2005). As discussed above, Redpath et al. conflict analysis includes stakeholder analysis which involves identifying stakeholders, mapping stakeholder values, positions, attitudes, and goals. Additionally, Glasl (2004) has listed the contents of conflict analysis as conflicting issues, course of the conflict, parties involved in the conflict, positions and relationships of parties and attitudes of parties (cited in Prager, 2002). However, the focus on each aspect depends specifically on the conflict in question, with some aspects being more relevant than other depending on the situation.

Based on the literature, in this research the stakeholders were analysed by firstly identifying all stakeholders and determining the most active parties. Then the organisation of the active parties

was discussed based on Glasl (2004) (cited in Prager, 2002) and the values, goals, attitudes, and understandings was analysed based on Redpath et al. (2013) and Sidaway (2005). The conflict was analysed by mapping out the causes and effects of the conflict and identifying core causes based on Hammill et al. 'Conflict-sensitive conservation practitioners' manual' (2009).

The main challenges for conflict and stakeholder analysis are selection of appropriate evaluation criteria and data collection methods (Reed, 2008), selecting an optimal amount of stakeholder for analysis and identifying key stakeholders (Billgren and Holmén, 2008; Colvin et al., 2016; Reed, 2008). Colvin et al. paper argues that in many cases, stakeholder tend to be viewed as self-evident which leads to repeated identification of the 'usual subjects' and marginalisation of others (Colvin et al., 2016). The local context, such as the economic, social and cultural requirement as well as physical characteristics, is very important in conservation planning (Louette et al., 2011) and stakeholder and conflict analysis always needs to consider the local setting (Billgren and Holmén, 2008; Henle et al., 2008).

Most scholars agree that a comprehensive and systematic conflict analysis along with the relevant stakeholder analysis is essential in resolving conservation conflicts. Since conservation conflicts are multi-layered and dynamic, conflict analysis needs to take into account all aspects of the conflict and stakeholder analysis is often considered a useful tool for this. Additionally, conflict analysis needs to take into account the local setting and, therefore, my research can be used in the conflict resolution in Vöhandu river primeval valley landscape reserve where a comprehensive conflict analysis has not been undertaken.



## METHODOLOGY

In this research, I employed an interpretivist paradigm and an intensive approach since my research aim is to study a specific case in great detail to understand the underlying reasons behind the conflict and provide a comprehensive analysis. To achieve the level of detail required for a case study research, I made use of multiple methods for data collection (Ylikoski, Zahle, 2019: 2). This allows the research to be more comprehensive, by collecting different data through separate methods, and to confirm findings across methods (Zahle, 2018:1). The methods used to analyse the conflict in Võhandu landscape reserve were semi-structured interviews with 7 local landowners, an official from the Environmental Board and a representative from the Estonian Fund for Nature (ELF), content analysis of correspondence between the Environmental Board and local landowners and participant observation during meetings between the Environmental Board and ELF.

### Content analysis

The content analysis of correspondence was used to understand the general context of the Võhandu river landscape reserve case, to identify active parties in the conflict, and to map the values, attitudes, goals and understandings of these parties. The correspondence was retrieved from a public database that included the letters sent out from the Environmental Board and the letters and emails sent to the Environmental Board were provided by the Environmental Board. I analysed 12 letters, the dates and contents of which can be seen from Table 1.

**Table 1:** Summary of the letters used in the content analysis

Date	Sender(s) and recipient(s)	Contents
05.10.2017	From the Environmental Board (EB) to all the landowners	Announcement of renewal of regulations
23.11.2017	From the workgroup to EB	Questions about the renewal of regulations and area in general
24.11.2017	From a local NGO to EB	Questions about the renewal of regulations and area in general
07.12.2017	From EB to local NGO	Answers to questions
11.12.2017	From a group of landowners to EB	Stance on the renewal of regulations and process so far
21.12.2017	From an attorney of one of the landowners to EB	Stance on the renewal of regulation and process so far, reference to legal legitimacy
13.01.2018	From a group of landowners to EB	Joint appeal to cease the process of renewal of regulations

16.01.2018	From EB to the attorney	Answer to the previous letter sent by the attorney, explains process and legal aspects
01.02.2018	From a group of landowners to EB and the Ministry of the Environment	Stance on the renewal of regulations, reasons for not agreeing to a landscape reserve
02.03.2018	From EB to all of the landowners	Answer to the joint appeal
21.02.2019	From EB to all of the landowners	Invitations to individual meeting to discuss the border
06.03.2019	From a group of landowners to EB	Questions the legitimacy of the regulations, proposes alternatives

Analysing correspondence is useful because I could get a better sense of the opinions of the stakeholders since unlike in interviews, they were not expressing their opinion to a third party (i.e. me, the researcher) but communicated directly to the other party. This means that they were less likely to be concerned of what picture they paint from the situation and likely to be more straightforward in correspondence. Additionally, it helped me to better understand the relationships between the parties.

### **Participant observation**

I also used participant information to gather data in my research and understand the context of the case. I participated in three meetings between the Environmental Board and ELF as well as informal discussions of the issue in Vöhandu river landscape reserve where I took fieldnotes and gathered useful insights into the research topic. The data gathered from participant observation helped me to understand the conflict better, provide some background information and support some of the arguments I make in my analysis.

### **Semi-structured interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were used to keep some degree of similarity between different interviews for analysis purposes, however, I also wanted to develop a discussion with the interviewee in order to understand their experience and ensure some flexibility (Longhurst, 2003:119). I also changed, added and removed some questions depending on the person I was talking to and the flow of the interview. For example, in some cases the interviewee already answered a question in their previous answer, therefore, there was no need to ask the questions again. Furthermore, in other cases I would need to ask the same questions in different ways to get

a thorough answer. Using semi-structured interviews helped me to develop a conversation with the interviewee and acquire more detailed answers (Valentine, 2005:111).

The interviewees were initially contacted based on the contact information of local landowners provided by the Environmental Board. The landowners were divided by the Environmental Board into those against and for the renewal of regulation and those whose opinion the Environmental Board is unsure of. First, I sent out a general email to all the contacts explaining the research projects and asking for a interview. Those who replied to the first email, I contacted personally via email or phone. I also phoned everyone who did not reply to the first email and acquired some interviews via that method. Additionally, I used snowball sampling to recruit new contacts (Valentine, 2005:117), however, most of the participants suggested either the same person (a representative of one of the villages) or could not name anyone. I was able to have 7 interviews with the local landowners which was less than I expected, however, I was able to interview at least 2 landowners from each category identified by the Environmental Board. The process of acquiring interviews was made difficult by the distrust the local landowners had for me, possibly linking me to the Environmental Board rather than an independent researcher. I also tried several times to contact the representative of one of the villages who a number of the participants had mentioned, however, I could not manage to get him to agree to an interview. Additionally, I had the time limit of completing the interviews before September, which also limited my ability to gather information to the degree of saturation (Blicharska, Angelstam, 2010: 69).

The interview questions<sup>6</sup> were based on Glasl (2004) and modified according to feedback from my dissertation supervisor and ELF representatives, who were the supervisors of my internship. The interviews were conducted in July-August 2019.

## **Ethics**

The main ethical issues of interviewing are confidentiality and anonymity (Longhurst, 2003:127) which were addressed in the following manner: before the interview took place, I sent out a information sheet about the research project to the participants and a consent form for them to sign if they agreed to participate. The information sheet listed the nature and purpose of the study, expected benefits, possible risks and harms, information about confidentiality, anonymity and data storage, as well as contact details for me, my supervisor and the school's ethics board.

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<sup>6</sup> Appendices 2, 3, 4

Additionally, the participants were given the opportunity to ask questions before the interview and withdraw from the interview at any stage as well as refuse to answer some questions without explanation. The data collected from the interviews, correspondence and participant information was kept in password protected computer database and the participants identity is kept anonymous throughout the research (Longhurst, 2003:127). The data gathered from participant observation was only used to understand the context of the conflict and therefore, makes no reference to the people providing the information. The correspondence between the Environmental Board and local landowners was provided by the Environmental Board and used in this research with their consent.

### **Analysis**

I employed inductive constant comparative methodology in my data analysis and marked up my data from the interviews and correspondence by codes. Based on Cope (2003) I employed open, axial and selective coding. For open coding, I went through the material and assigned codes to important passages, words and phrases. I then used axial coding to draw out specific categories and followed them in the material to test their relevance. After I had identified a core category, I used selective coding to add examples (Cope, 2003: 451-452). I used QDA Miner Lite software for coding. The results of the analysis are presented as a stakeholder analysis and as a conflict map based on Hammill et al. (2009).

Since the research area is in Estonia, the interviews were conducted and transcribed in Estonian and correspondence is also in Estonian. However, in coding the data, I developed codes and the following themes in English and the analysis was also done in English. The quotations from interviews and letters used in this research are also translated into English with the aim of keeping the original message of the quote as unchanged as possible as opposed to directly translating from word to word. However, it needs to be taken into consideration that my interpretation of the data is added to the translations although I tried to be as objective as possible.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Stakeholder analysis

#### **Conflicting parties**

The most active conflicting parties identified are the local landowners and the Environmental Board. This was determined by examining the correspondence the Environmental Board has had on the issue, the exercise of identifying stakeholders the members of the Environmental Board undertook and from interviews with local landowners and the Environmental Board. However, local landowners can be divided into different groups depending on their attitude towards the conflict and activeness. The Environmental Board itself has divided landowners into those most against the renewal of regulation, those for and those whose opinion the Environmental Board is unsure of. Additionally, based on the interview data, the landowners that were interviewed for the research can be divided into groups of:

1. landowners who are for the renewal of regulations and having a landscape reserve as planned by the Environmental Board
2. landowners who would like a landscape reserve or some sort of a protection of the area but not in the way the Environmental Board is planning
3. landowners who are less interested in the issue and have no clear viewpoint
4. landowners who do not want any protected area for various reasons.

However, in each group identified, there are only 1-2 landowners due to the limited number of interviews I was able to conduct. Therefore, these groupings are solely based on data from the interviews and cannot be generalised on the population of landowners in the area.

Furthermore, from participating in meetings with the Environmental Board and ELF, it became apparent that there are some individuals among the local landowners who are most actively against the renewal of regulations and are trying to enforce their opinion on other landowners. Unfortunately, I was not able to have interviews with the landowners suspected of that, and therefore, cannot fully comment on their interests and motivations. However, from the participant observation at the Environmental Board meeting it became apparent that the most active landowners have formed an unofficial group themselves and actively oppose the renewal of

regulations, and, at least some of them, also oppose a protected area per se (Meeting with Environmental Board).

### **Other stakeholders**

Additionally, during an exercise with the members of the Environmental Board where they identified the stakeholders in this issue and mapped them according to their level of interest and influence, other stakeholders, besides the local landowners, were identified.

These were:

1. forest companies that own land in or close to the area
2. tourism entrepreneurs
3. the state heritage conservation department
4. the state forest management centre
5. the local government
6. geologists who might be interested in the sandstone outcrops.

The state forest management centre, geologists, and heritage conservation department were identified as having low interest and influence in the issue, the tourism entrepreneurs as having high interest but low influence, and the local government as having low interest but high influence in this issue. However, the correspondence the Environmental Board has had on this issue has been almost exclusively with local landowners which shows that the other interest groups are not active in this issues and therefore, in this research are negligent in the conflict analysis. The local government was brought up by the Environmental Board and ELF as a potential influential stakeholder in this issue that they would like to see more included, however, so far, the local government has been passive. Therefore, the conflicting parties most active in this issue are the Environmental Board and local landowners who can be divided into subgroups based on their interests and involvement.

Additionally, ELF is another party in the conflict, however, as stated in the interview by the representative of ELF, its role is to be a neutral bystander and is therefore not a conflicting party as such. From participant observation and interviews with the landowners, it became clear that ELF has not played a very active role in the conflict yet. When the landowners were asked to name any other parties interested in the conflict specifically or area in general, none of the landowners

mentioned ELF, its representatives or made any reference to an NGO like ELF being a party. According to personal communication with a representative from ELF, they have communicated with at least one local to discuss the issues and are actively communicating with the Environmental Board on the issue. Therefore, it needs to be taken into account that they have had much more interaction with the Environmental Board than the landowners meaning they have limited understanding of the landowners opinions. However, with regards to this research, ELF personnel involved in this case have proven to be a useful insights as a third party that has not been as affected by the history and emotions of this case.

### **Organisation of parties**

From the active conflicting parties identified, the Environmental Board is an organised governmental body and the landowners are not officially organised. In the beginning of the process of renewing the regulations in 2017, a workgroup was formed of the locals whose task was to communicate with the Environmental Board and represent all the local landowners and convey information from the Environmental Board to other landowners. However, as the Environmental Board talked with local landowners outside the workgroup, it became apparent that the workgroup was disseminating false or modified information to the other landowners, so the Environmental Board decided to cease contact with the workgroup and communicate with local landowners individually (Interview with the Environmental Board, letter from the Environmental Board, 02.03.2018).

However, from personal communication with the Environmental Board and ELF, it seems that the workgroup, or at least part of it, is still active in opposing the renewal of regulations as a group. This can also be seen from that some of the people sending in the emails to the Environmental Board opposing the renewal of regulations correspond to the original members of the workgroup. Therefore, some of the more active landowners have organised themselves into an informal group to oppose the renewal of regulations. However, I was only able to interview one of the landowners who said they were part of the original workgroup and therefore, cannot comment on the interests and motivations of the workgroup.

From the analysis of interviews and correspondence between the Environmental Board and local landowners, the stakeholders' values, attitudes, and goals will be discussed.

### **Values: results**

For the values they see in the area, the interviewees brought out the silence, closeness to nature, aesthetic value, clean air and peacefulness. Additionally, five out of seven interviewees had been connected to the area from infancy and their land has been in their family for multiple generations which made them feel a sense of responsibility to manage the land with respect. Furthermore, from the interviews it became apparent that this is the case for most of the families in the area. Most of the interviewees were confident that the locals will keep the nature in the area as it has been even without an official protected area status. For example, one of the landowners interviewed has classified a part of forest on his land as pristine forest where he intervenes minimally (Landowner 3). Similarly, another landowner described his property as being kept as "unorganised as possible", meaning that unless a tree falls on the road, everything is kept how nature organises it (Landowner 5). In summary, all the interviewees appreciate the nature in the area the most, and a majority of them also have a family connections and feel some degree of responsibility to keep their properties as they have been for generations.

The values that the Environmental Board and ELF see in the area are the landscape as a whole which includes the sandstone outcrops, the river, the forests along the banks, and the old villages on the banks of the river (Interview with the Environmental Board and ELF). Additionally, from the interview with the official from the Environmental Board, the identity value of the area was brought out as well as the historical structure of the villages, old mill places and the fact that the area has remained nearly unchanged for the last one hundred years. From governmental documents, the values of the area are the habitats (river, streams, meadows, swamps), sandstone outcrops as well as specific species that are under state protection. These include *Cobitis taenia*, *Cottus gobio*, *Unio crassus*, *Alcedo atthis* and *Thymallus thymallus* (Letter from the Environmental Board, 05.10.2017). Furthermore, from the letters the Environmental Board has sent to local landowners, they have also stated that the Environmental Board aims to protect the beauty and charm of the area whilst promoting local development and protected area status helps to preserve and protect these values (Letter from the Environmental Board, 07.12.2017).



From the interviews it became apparent that although many of the landowners appreciate the nature in the area the most, they do not understand what the Environmental Board wants to protect, hence there is a questions of values in the area. It appears that most of the interviewees were expecting the Environmental Board to name specific species or habitats that need protection, therefore, they were expecting ecological values. Some of the interviewees pointed out that cutting forests should be restricted more, there is a need to continue monitoring and protecting the orchids in the area and more monitoring is needed for the river. Additionally, most of the interviewees emphasised that before agreeing on the borders of the protected area, the values of the area and how to protect them need to be agreed upon.

*“Generally they say that first agree with deciding on the borders and then we will see what happens /.../ It begins with what do we need to protect, what is the value. Do we have that value and does it need to be protected as a conservation area.” (Landowner 3).*

*“Right now we had the mapping of borders /.../ but this is completely secondary if we do not know what is going to happen inside the border” (Landowner 2).*

### **Values: discussion**

From looking at which each party believes to be the values in the area, it appears that both sides value the nature and how the area has been for generations, however, the local landowners do not in most cases connect that to landscape values. Whereas the Environmental Board and ELF see the worth of the area as a set of values that comprise the landscape, the locals did not express an understanding of landscape value and were expecting a list of specific ecological features and individual objects.

Although the Environmental Board has listed the values in the area in their letters sent to the local landowners as well as in government publications regarding the area<sup>7</sup>, it still became apparent from the interviews that the interviewees were unsure of the values in the area. This suggests that they have not made themselves familiar with the letters the Environmental Board has sent out or have not understood them. Additionally, from the analysis of the correspondence between locals and the Environmental Board, it appeared that the workgroup was unsure if the values listed by the

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<sup>7</sup> Keskkonnaamet, 2015.

[https://www.keskkonnaamet.ee/sites/default/files/vohandu\\_joe\\_ha\\_kkk\\_2015\\_2024.pdf](https://www.keskkonnaamet.ee/sites/default/files/vohandu_joe_ha_kkk_2015_2024.pdf)

Environmental Board are even there and stated that expert research is needed to determine the current values (Letter from the workgroup, 23.11.2017).

The need for comprehensive research about the values in the area was expressed in both interviews and letters. In 2018, the Environmental Board ordered an expert evaluation of the values in the area<sup>8</sup>, however, it became apparent from the interviews that the local landowners who are familiar with the research do not accept its findings on the basis that the experts were seen in the area only for a very short amount of time, they did not interact with the locals and the findings produced were, as expressed by some landowners, ridiculous.

*“Experts were here four times, on four days. That’s it. To look over 750 hectares in four days, it is nonsense ././ Experts suggested to draw the border 1 kilometer from the river and the only explanation was that they thought it was pretty forest without any ex ante evaluation.” (Landowner 3).*

In conclusion, the local landowners and the Environmental Board both value the area for its ecological and social aspects, however, with regards to conservation, the landowners are expecting specific ecological values whereas the Environmental Board sees the main value of the area as a landscape value. Therefore, the stakeholders value different aspects of the area which affects their use and protection goals. Additionally, most the local landowners want a thorough and trustworthy expert research of the values in the area before agreeing to any protected status. However, the expert research ordered in 2018 has not been accepted by the majority of landowners and has possibly fuelled the conflict even further.

### **Attitudes: results**

Many of the interviewees did not understand the necessity of a protected area. It was very common for the interviewees to express the opinion that the locals will protect the area themselves because they live there and care for the area and, therefore, state protection is superfluous. Since many of the interviewees own land that has been in their family for generations they expressed a sense of responsibility they have to keep the land as it is.

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<sup>8</sup> Artes Terrae, 2018. [https://www.keskkonnaamet.ee/sites/default/files/1813mt3\\_vohandu\\_eh\\_tekst.pdf](https://www.keskkonnaamet.ee/sites/default/files/1813mt3_vohandu_eh_tekst.pdf)

*“Our area is a native area /.../ there is no blemishing of nature, everyone appreciates their lands..”*  
(Landowner 4)

Furthermore, a number of interviewees expressed the opinion that the Environmental Board believes that without a landscape reserve, the locals will destroy the nature in the area, which is not true.

*“Right now there is the renewal of regulations and from the initial documents it seems as if the Environmental Board thinks that when the protected area is not formed, then locals will immediately cut down their forests and in other words would hurt this nature. Although, we could cut down the forest anytime or do any mess, but we do not want to, because we want to continue living here”* (Landowner 4).

Many interviewees argued that the officials, and government in general, should trust the locals more.

*“People asked at the meetings why is the protected area necessary? And finally it appeared that a protected area is necessary to protect the land from the landowners. I think it’s nonsense”*  
(Landowner 6).

Most of the interviewees believed that locals will protect the nature themselves and therefore, they do not need the Environmental Board or any other state body to intervene. One landowner pointed out that distrusting landowners is a common attitude in Estonia, which is reflected, for example, in how the habitats of endangered species are kept secret from the landowners, because of the fear they will harm the species. Another landowner mentioned that it is a common attitude amongst the locals in area that no state protection is needed, since the landowners themselves will protect the land and it is not up for the state to decide what the landowners can or cannot do on his or her land.

*“There a certain extreme that everyone leans towards that we do not need any protection (of the area), we know ourselves, these are our lands /.../ we keep it ourselves and it is no one else’s business what I do on my land.”* (Landowner 1)

Couple of the interviewees also said that they believe there are already enough laws and restrictions in place that deal with environmental protection, that to have a separate protected area is an overkill.

## Attitudes: discussion

A common attitude among the landowners is that they will protect their land themselves and they do not need a government body dictating them what is allowed to do on their private lands. Therefore, there is a feeling of threat of their private property rights being violated by state intervention. This sentiment was strongly expressed in the correspondence between the Environmental Board and local landowners:

*“On what considerations does Võhandu river primeval valley need to be taken under protection and limit the rights of landowners /.../ What kind of danger do the landowners pose to the river? Why is it necessary to protect the river from the landowners?” (Letter from the workgroup, 23.11.2017).*

This quote illustrates the frustration the landowners feel and the sense that the Environmental Board wants to protect the land from the landowners. Especially the phrase “limit the rights of landowners” suggests that if the landscape reserve goes ahead as planned, the landowners will face further restrictions on their activities.

The aspect of private land ownership often complicates conservation planning and management and brings in a layer of social and economic dynamics (Kamal et al., 2014:577). In the case of Võhandu landscape reserve, a top-down approach is implemented with the Environmental Board involving local landowners in planning out the new regulations, however, the final decision-making is done by the Ministry of Environment and the government (Letter from Environmental Board, 05.10.2017). It is an institutional practice that cannot be changed by the Environmental Board however much they wish to involve and empower locals. The top-down approach to conservation implemented in this case on privately owned land is a significant cause of this conflict. The approach has a negative impact on the community with local landowners feeling run over and their rights being violated which makes them less willing to cooperate in the conservation efforts having the potential to impact the ecology of the area negatively (Kamal et al., 2014:577). Even though the government provides subsidies for landowners and aim to promote the development of local communities, in the case of Võhandu, the principle of private land rights seems to be important.

*“There are plenty of places in Estonia where people do not go to and step on so protect that, I think. /.../ If I am a good master, a good owner, I will use this land sustainably and prudently, but I do not need an official to write me precepts.” (Landowner 6)*

This attitude of discrediting landowners, whether true or not, contributes to the general distrust - as the landowners feel that the Environmental Board does not trust them, they do not trust the Environmental Board.

### **Goals: results**

With regard to the goals of the stakeholders, the goals of the Environmental Board have been stated in various letters sent to the landowners and discussed in the interview with the official from the Environmental Board. However, the goals of the landowners are more difficult to discuss. Firstly because the local landowners are not a homogenous group but have rather expressed different attitudes and opinions towards the conflict. Secondly, many of the more active landowners have been rather secretive about their motivations and goals, which is expressed in the reluctance to give interviews and the Environmental Board's impressions who have worked with the landowners for several years.

The goals of the Environmental Board with renewing the regulations are, as stated in the official letters, to continue monitoring and protecting the values listed in the introduction and values section of this paper, and change the border of the landscape reserve to one that is better understood from the nature (Letter from the Environmental Board, 05.10.2017). With regards to the border, the goal of the Environmental Board is to keep the area almost the same as the current landscape reserve and modify the border only in way that would make it easier to follow in nature and more practical, i.e. exclude private lawns where applicable and avoid a situation where one part of a lawn or building is in the protected area and another part is not (Interview with the Environmental Board). Furthermore, the overall goal is to renew the regulations before 2023 in order to avoid a situation where there are no area specific regulations, but instead the Nature Conservation Law paragraph 31 restrictions apply. According to the Environmental Board, these restrictions are stricter than the current ones and the ones the Environmental Board is planning on having (Interview with the Environmental Board). Additionally, the Environmental Board has stated in their letters that they aim to preserve the beauty and charm of the area for future generations, protect the area as a whole and continue supporting the development of the local communities. The aim of the landscape reserve is to guarantee the preservation of the values and to prevent any activities that might harm them (Letter from the Environmental Board, 07.12.2017).

From the correspondence, the goals of at least some of the landowners are to stop the process of renewal of regulations and not create or continue to have a landscape reserve in the area, take the sandstone outcrops and primeval valley under protection as individual objects and to form a conservation area instead of landscape reserve, and have the border the same as the Natura 2000 border, excluding private lawns (Letters from landowners, 01.02.2018 and 06.03.2019). Additionally, a group of landowners submitted a joint appeal at the beginning of 2018 stating that they do not agree to the renewal of regulations and the new border proposed. Instead, they proposed to form a Vöhandu river conservation area instead of landscape reserve and align its border to the border of the Natura area excluding private lawns. The sandstone outcrops on private lawns should be taken under protection as individual objects (Letter from the landowners, 13.01.2018). From the interviews, the goals expressed by the landowners are to protect the sandstone outcrops, have a proper research of the values in the area in order to have a purposeful protected area and have the border of the protected area either the same as the border of Natura area or the old borders, which are 300 meter from each bank of the river (Landowners 1, 3, 4, 6). However, two of the landowners who expressed the most support for renewal of regulations, expressed the opinion that the current regulations are fine and new ones could be even stricter, especially with regards to logging and using pesticides on fields, and the border should be more than just the Natura area (Landowners 2, 7).

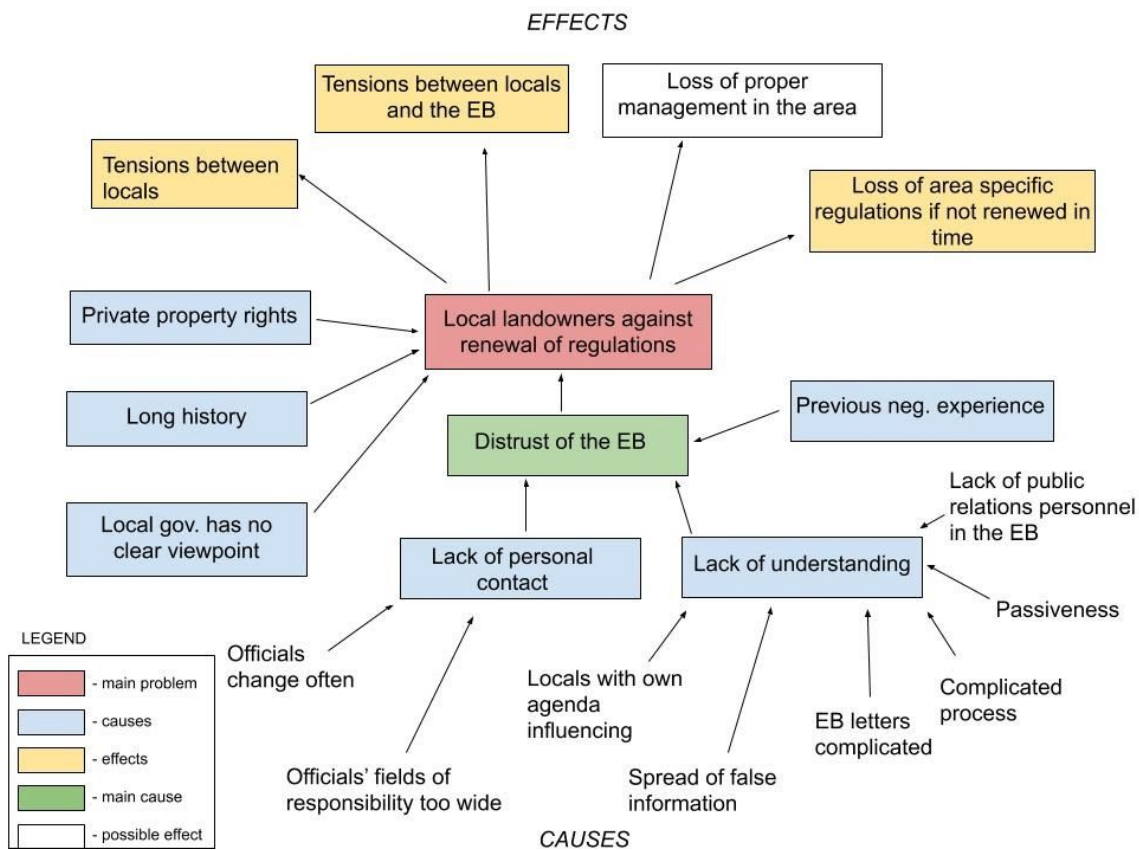
### **Goals: discussion**

The main conflicting goals in this case are that the Environmental Board wants to keep the area under state protection as a landscape reserve and keep the general area of the current landscape reserve and only modify the borders so that they would be easier to follow in nature and be more practical. However, the landowners opposing the renewal of regulations wish to have the area under protection aligned with the Natura area, exclude private lawns and take the sandstone outcrops under protection as individual objects. Both parties see the value of the sandstone outcrops and the area under Natura protection, however, most of the landowners do not wish state protection in the whole of the area. The opposing goals of the parties hinders the process of renewal of regulations and has the potential to aggravate the conflict, since the parties are aiming towards different outcomes. As per Knierim and Jens Nagel's definition of land use conflicts,

opposing goals are considered the defining feature of what makes a situation a conflict (Knierim and Jens Nagel, 2000: 528).

### **Conflict map**

The core problem of the conflict is that many local landowners are against the renewal of regulations of Vöhandu river landscape reserve and are only willing to agree to the Natura 2000 conservation area that is already in place. The causes and effects of the conflict are brought out in Figure 2.



**Fig. 2:** Conflict map for Vöhandu river landscape reserve

### **Causes**

The most important cause of the conflict is the distrust between the Environmental Board and local landowners. This distrust comes from the lack of personal contact between the officials from the Environmental Board and local landowners, previous negative experience, lack of understanding of

the issue from the landowners' side and the complexity of the process of renewal of regulations. Furthermore, the long history of the issue, the fact that local government has no clear standpoint and the sentiment of some landowners that their private property rights are violated also contributes to the conflict.

### Distrust

The main cause of the conflict is distrust between the Environmental Board and local landowners. This has been brought on by lack of understanding, lack of personal contact between the Environmental Board and local landowners and previous negative experience.

One of the reasons for the levels of distrust is **previous negative experience**. Many of the interviewees and letters from landowners expressed their frustration with how the Natura 2000 site was created in 2008 in the area, that is without any consultation with locals. Since Natura 2000 was done "behind their backs", many expressed the fear that it is going to be the same with the landscape reserve.

*"There is already Natura in the area, which was of course done behind the locals' backs... /.../ The borders were drawn without any reference to landowners, no coordination about the borders."*  
(Landowner 3)

As discussed above, some of the interviewees were also disappointed with the expert evaluation the Environmental Board has ordered in 2018. Similarly with the Natura 2000, the expert evaluation was also done without consulting and involving locals which made them distrust and even ridicule it. Additionally, from the correspondence from local landowners to the Environmental Board, it appears that when the Environmental Board tried to renew the regulations at the end of 1990s, the locals were not included, they did not feel heard which gave them a negative experience of the Environmental Board and the process in general and can explain why they are against it now.

Another reason for distrust is the **lack of personal contact** between members of the Environmental Board and the local landowners. From an interview with a local landowner, it was



suggested that the lack of personal contact is an institutional problem. The landowner believed that the entire department of environmental management is so “dried up” it is not capable of delivering environmental management in the quality it used to and how the landowners expect. The area of responsibility for officials are too wide, they are not able to travel to see and talk to locals in person and they have no connections with the local communities (Landowners 3).

Similar sentiments were expressed in the interview with ELF along with the view that most people do not want to receive letters from the state, but they want the officials to come and talk to them in person, they want a familiar official they can discuss any problems with and trust. At the moment that is not how it is (Interview with ELF).

The lack of personal contact between the Environmental Board and the local landowners has led the latter to distrust and misunderstand the motivations of the Environmental Board. From a personal communication with ELF, it appeared that from communicating with one of the more active landowner, the main worries of the landowners are that if the landscape reserve goes ahead, they cannot rent out agricultural lands to regular farmers but only to ecologically friendly farmers, the price of real-estate will fall, there will be stricter rules for forest management, and during the process, the Environmental Board will enlarge the borders of the landscape reserve. (Representative from ELF, pers.comm. 25.04.2019). The Environmental Board, however, as expressed in their letters, meetings and interview, has stated that this is not something that they wish for or will happen. However, the distrust between the Environmental Board and the local landowners has reached a level that most of the landowners still distrust the motivations of the Environmental Board, and there is the feeling that whatever the Environmental Board says, they will still want to deceive the landowners and pursue their own goals, and that the Environmental Board has some sort of a secret plan to bring in wider and more restrictive restrictions (Interview with ELF). In one of the letter from the landowners to the Environmental Board and the Ministry of Environment, it was even stated that *“The purpose behind the activities of the Environmental Board is to form a new protected area. However, this is done under the label of renewal of regulations”* (Letter from the landowners, 01.02.2018). This quote illustrates the level of distrust the landowners feel towards the Environmental Board by suggesting that the institution has a secret agenda.

**Lack of understanding** of the situation and process is the third main reason for the distrust. The fact that many local landowners do not fully understand the situation was made clear from the

letters sent to the Environmental Board, from interviews with local landowners and ELF. From the interviews with local landowners, it appeared that at least half of the interviewees had limited understanding of the situation. One of the landowners thought that some environmental body from the government wants to form a new protected area and change the area status from landscape reserve to conservation area (looduskaitseala), another landowner mentioned the fact that the Environmental Board aims to renew regulations themselves but thought it involves allowing strangers on their land. Furthermore, another landowner pointed out that it was difficult to understand the situation because the officials were not explaining it well enough. However, around half of the interviewees showed fairly good understanding of the situation, they mentioned the phrase “renewal of regulations” before a question regarding it was asked from them, and could also explain the need for a renewal as the old regulation will lose validity some time in the near future. Some of the interviewees also mentioned that they understand that the officials are under pressure for time and possibly the Ministry of Environment, however, they felt that the Environmental Board was rushing the process too much.

From the analysis of the correspondence between the Environmental Board and local landowners, in the initial letter sent in 2017, the workgroup, which has supposed to speak for all the local landowners, expressed their confusion over whether the current process was about renewing regulations or establishing a new protected area. Additionally, even though it was mentioned in the first letter the Environmental Board sent to the local landowners, the workgroup asked why the renewal is necessary, what are the current regulations, what does the process look like and what stage are they in the process (Letter from the workgroup, 23.11.2017). The Environmental Board has explained the process and necessity of a landscape reserve and renewing its regulations and the benefits it will bring in multiple letters, however, from the interviews it appeared that the locals still had limited understanding of the issue.

The lack of understanding comes from the complexity of the process, possibly unsuccessful communication from the Environmental Board, lack of public relations personnel in the Environmental Board, spread of false and modified information by some locals with their own agenda, and, in some cases, an unwillingness or a sense of passiveness to understand and participate.

The complexity of the process means that landowners with little experience with government procedures and/or environmental management find it difficult to grasp. The representative from

ELF brought out that the process of the renewal of regulation is very confusing and it very common for people to distrust something they cannot understand (Interview with ELF).

The complexity of the process is aggravated by the letters sent from the Environmental Board to local landowners which are often too clerical for landowners further limiting their understanding of the situation. However, since the Environmental Board has received some training on letter writing and changed them accordingly, the representative from ELF believed that the letters are “pretty much human-friendly” and need little reproofs. Therefore, even though it still remains as one of the causes for conflict, this issue has been acknowledged by the Environmental Board and is worked on. Moreover, it was also suggested that most people do not like to receive letters in the first place and prefer to speak in person to government officials (Interview with ELF).

The lack of public relations personnel in the Environmental Board is another institutional problem potentially aggravating the conflict. It was suggested from a representative of ELF that if the process would have made more clear to the public, it would improve the locals’ understanding of the issue and possible help them agree to the renewal of regulations (Interview with ELF).

As discussed under stakeholder analysis, it has become apparent that a certain group of landowners, mainly the ones belonging to the initial workgroup, have been spreading false or modified information among other landowners. This factor further confuses the situation for the landowners and increases their distrust of the Environmental Board. It is possible, that at least some of the landowners would rather believe other landowners than the Environmental Board, because they have personal contact with them and social relations, but none with the Environmental Board. Therefore, receiving false information, that is most likely modified against the Environmental Board, can increase their distrust towards the institution.

Another factor contributing to the lack of understanding is the passiveness among landowners to make themselves aware of the issue and participate in the discussions. From the interviews it became apparent that most landowners were not fully aware of the purpose and process of renewing regulations. Additionally, many landowners questioned the need for a protected area and wanted to know the values in the area, although in the letters sent from the Environmental Board the values are stated several times. The representative from ELF suggested that this comes from Soviet legacy, where citizens could not participate in government decision-making and, therefore, the landowners are not used to or expect to participate in this case (Representative from ELF, pers.comm. 15.11.2019).

### Long history

From the letters sent to the Environmental Board, it seems that at least some local landowners believe that since the landscape reserve was first created in 1964, which was during the Soviet rule in Estonia, it is not legally applicable anymore. Furthermore, the letter sent by a small group of local landowners referenced several historical documents that to them showed that the Võhandu river landscape reserve was never confirmed by the Soviet officials nor the Estonian government after the Soviet rule, and because the local government in the area did not approve of the renewal of regulation back in 2003, then there is actually no protected area or legitimate regulation to renew (Letter from landowners, 06.03.2019). However, the Environmental Board has explained that this is not the case and the area does have an official status. Nevertheless, the long history of the case has increased the confusion among landowners who have been involved with the case over the years. There was also a sense of fatigue among some of the landowners interviewed and representatives of the Environmental Board due to the long history of the conflict.

### Private property rights and local government

The attitude of private property rights being violated with a protected area is discussed under the attitudes section of stakeholder analysis part of the research. The fact that the local government has not expressed a clear view on this issue can have some effect on the conflict, because the local landowners seem to see the local government as a body of authority and if they would adopt a clear standpoint it could help to end the stalemate the situation is currently in. However, since I did not interview anyone from the local government, I cannot comment on their goals, interests or motives.

## Effects

The immediate effects of the conflict are increased tensions between landowners with different opinions and between the local landowners and the Environmental Board and the protracted process of renewing the regulations. One of the landowners interviewed who supports the renewal of regulations said that when a group of landowners collected signatures to limit the border and they did not sign, one of their neighbours said they are crazy (Landowners 7). The tensions between landowners with different views can negatively affect the future development of the community.

Additionally, if the regulations are not renewed before 2023 because of the conflict, another effect is that general regulations set in the Nature Conservation Law paragraph 31 will apply to the area instead of area specific regulations that take into account the needs of the community. According to the Environmental Board, the restrictions set in the Nature Conservation Law paragraph 31 are stricter than the ones they are planning (Interview with the Environmental Board). For example, the Nature Conservation Law prohibits the construction of buildings and cutting forests for renewal purposes unless stated otherwise in conservation area regulations (Looduskaitseadus, 2004). However, the Environmental Board is planning on allowing buildings that are up to 20m<sup>2</sup> in area and up to 5m in height without applying for construction permit, as well as allowing for small area clearcutting (Interview with the Environmental Board).

The conflict may also adversely affect the management of the area, since less emphasis is put on that and more on agreeing on the regulations or if the protected status is even needed. However, in terms of this research, there is not evidence that any part of the area has deteriorated because of the conflict. Since my research was more focused on the causes, the effects are understudied and I am therefore not capable of further commenting on the effects.

## **CONCLUSION**

This research aimed to analyse the conflict in Vöhandu river landscape reserve. This was done through stakeholder analysis of the parties involved and mapping the causes and effects of the conflict. Firstly, I will discuss the contributions this study can have to the existing knowledge of conflict and stakeholder analysis, and how the research changed from the initial plan. Then I will summarise the findings of the research and provide some recommendations for further study. Finally, I will address the limitations of the study.

### **Contributions to knowledge**

This research analysed the conflicting parties and causes of the conflict that emerged from the renewal of regulations in Vöhandu river landscape reserve. I identified several causes from the analysis of my data that allow to understand the situation better and hopefully move towards increased understanding between parties and perhaps a solution or management of the conflict. There had not been any analysis of the situation before my research so this research has filled the gap of trying to understand the causes of the conflict and the conflicting parties. Additionally, this study has provided an example of conflict analysis involving stakeholder analysis in a case with long history and complex social dynamics.

### **Progress of change**

Before undertaking data collection, I also aimed to research the effects of the conflict and provide some possible solutions. However, during my data collection I came to understand that the causes and the dynamics between the parties are more complex than I had anticipated which set limits to analysing the effects as well as finding possible solutions. Therefore, I decided to focus on the causes and more active parties of the conflict, although some of the possible effects are discussed.

### **Summary of findings**

The active parties in the conflict, local landowners and the Environmental Board, in most cases value highly the area for its nature and historical significance. However, they hold different views on how to best protect it. There is a strong sense of not wanting a government body to intervene in the management of private property among the landowners, making the process of renewing regulations that the Environmental Board is obliged to undertake, a challenging one. With regards to the goals of the parties involved, the Environmental Board aims to keep the area as a landscape reserve in order to protect the values of the landscape as a whole. However, most of the

landowners appear to want to cease the process of the renewal of regulations and instead take a smaller area aligning with Natura 2000 under protection as a conservation area and the sandstone outcrops outside the area under protection as individual objects.

There are several causes for the conflict as well as layers due to the long history of the situation. Most of the local landowners interviewed have also been through the previous two attempts of renewal of regulations and there was a sense of fatigue among the landowners and representatives of the Environmental Board.

The main cause of the conflict identified is the lack of trust between the Environmental Board and the landowners stemming from various reasons. The reasons identified in this research include lack of understanding and personal contact due to institutional problems, such as not enough personnel; previous negative experience, passiveness, long history, the influence of locals with personal agenda, spread of false information and the complexity of the process. Additionally, the notion of private property rights being violated by state intervention is strong among many of the landowners.

The effects of the conflict are the increased tensions between local landowners themselves and between the landowners and the Environmental Board. Additionally, if the regulations are not renewed by 2023, the area will lose the specific management plan and will instead apply to the regulations set out in the Nature Conservation Law paragraph 31 which do not take into consideration area specific needs.

### **Limitations**

The limitations to this research are that the effects of the conflict are understudied, the interview sample with local landowners is too small and interviews with some key landowners are missing. Additionally, there is no consideration for other stakeholders in the case, including the local government who in hindsight should have been included in the collection of the data as they could provide an alternative perspective to the conflict. Furthermore, a thorough analysis of the relationships between the stakeholders is lacking. This would help to plan the course of action necessary for the resolution of the conflict.

**Further research**

There is a need for more research into the effects of the conflict and other stakeholders. Some research into alternatives to what the Environmental Board can do to address the concerns the local landowners have brought out would be beneficial in understanding how to move forward. Additionally, more comprehensive research into the goals of the local landowners is required which would include a bigger sample of landowners. Furthermore, by employing focus group method in data collection, the relationships between landowners themselves and between landowners and the Environmental Board could be better understood.



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## APPENDIX 1

### Summary of the letters used in content analysis

Date	Activity	Outcome
1999	First attempt of renewal of regulations	Ended with decision of the local government to postpone the process till after the land reform that was ongoing at the time
2003	Second attempt of renewal of regulations	Local government decides not to approve the draft regulations because does not agree that the area should be protected as a landscape reserve but proposes to take the sandstone outcrops under protection as individual objects
2017		
5.10	The Environmental Board announces the plan to begin the process of renewal of regulations	Explains the reasons and process for the renewal of regulations
23.10	First meeting with local landowners	Landowners are asked to send in their opinion in two weeks time, local landowners form a workgroup among themselves
21.11	The Environmental Board sends out the initial draft of the intent of renewal of regulations	Deadline for opinions is 11.12.2017
23.11	Workgroup of local landowners send their questions and suggestions to the Environmental Board	Propose to extend the deadline of suggestions to 1.02.2018
11.12	A group of local landowners send a letter to the Environmental Board	Conclude that the Environmental Board has violated the principles of open procedure and not involved the landowners sufficiently. Landowners will submit their opinions by 01.02.2018. Similar letter is sent by their lawyer.
2018		
13.01	Meeting among the local landowners	A joint appeal is sent to the Environmental Board stating that the landowners do not agree to the proposed border of the protected area, suggest forming a conservation area instead
16.01	The Environmental Board extends the deadline of opinions to 1.02.2018	
1.02	Landowners send in their opinions on the renewal of regulations	Landowners are not satisfied with the poor procedural process and do not agree to the proposed border, propose to create a conservation area instead of landscape reserve
2.03	The Environmental Board sends a letter to all landowners in the area	The Environmental Board will no longer cooperate with the workgroup but only with landowners individually because they have received information that the workgroup has

		spread false or modified information.
10.12	Expert analysis of the values in the area is made public and a meeting is held with the landowners to discuss its findings	
2019		
4-7.03	The Environmental Board meets with landowners individually	Discuss the border of the landscape reserve
6.03	Some landowners sent their opinions on the renewal of regulations	State that the landscape reserve was never legitimate, propose to terminate the renewal of regulations process and create a new conservation area instead
3.04	The Environmental Board sends out a letter	Explains the legal legitimacy of the landscape reserve
18.09	The Environmental Board sends the landowners the draft intent of renewal of regulations along with proposed borders and invitation to meeting to discuss the draft	
1.10	Meeting to discuss the draft intent of renewal of regulations	

## APPENDIX 2

Interview questions for local landowners

### Background

1. What do you do for a living?
2. How long have you owned land here? Why did you choose this area?
3. What do you like about this area?
  - a. Is there something that you do not like or bothers you?
4. Is there a sense of living on a landscape area in your everyday life? Can you bring any examples?

### Positive aspects

5. Is there anything on your land that you think should be under protection?
  - a. Do you think there should be a landscape reserve? Why?
  - b. Can you bring any examples?
6. What benefits could a landscape reserve or a protected area in general have?

### Restrictions

7. Have you personally felt that the protected area status sets any limitations or restrictions to your activities?
8. What about for the area in general?
9. What do you think could be done differently?

### Communication

10. How important is it for you to know what happens in the area?
  - a. Where do you get the information?
  - b. Do you discuss it with any of your neighbours or any other locals?
11. Have you personally met with or communicated with any government officials? Can you bring any examples?
12. What was your experience from that?
13. Do you feel that recently there has been more communication with the Environmental Board?
  - a. If yes, what do you think is the reason for that?
14. Have you been to any meetings the Environmental Board has organised?
  - a. If yes, what was your impression of it? What would you have done differently?
  - b. If no, why not?
15. Have you been to any meetings (official or unofficial) organised by locals?

- a. If yes, what was your impressions of it?
  - b. If no, why not?
16. Are there any locals who are more active with regards to communicating with the any government bodies about this area or organising activities in the area?
- a. What is your opinion of that?

**Renewal of regulations**

17. Have you heard anything about renewal of regulations?
- a. What is your opinion of that? Do you think it is necessary? Why?
  - b. What changes could bring to you personally or the area in general?
  - c. Would you like something to change? If yes, what?
18. Do you have anything else you would like to add or ask?

## APPENDIX 3

Questions for the Environmental Board (EB)

### **Background to Võhandu river landscape reserve**

1. Please describe briefly the history of the landscape reserve and the renewal of regulations.
  - a. Why was the area granted protected area status in the first place?
  - b. How long have you been involved in the process?
2. What values do you see in the area? Why is it worth a protected area status?

### **Renewal of regulations**

3. Why is it necessary to renew the regulations?
  - a. What happens if the regulations are not renewed on time?
4. How long has EB tried to renew the regulations?
5. Please describe the process of renewal of regulations?
  - a. At what stage are you at the moment?
6. What changes will come with the renewal of regulations?
  - a. Who will be most affected? Why?
  - b. Are there any alternatives?
7. What should the new regulations include?
  - a. Where should the border run?

### **Experience with locals**

8. What has been your experience with local landowners so far?
9. Where do you think the opposition comes from?
10. What do you see as the main problem in communicating with locals?
11. How do you think communications could be improved?
  - a. How do you think EB could reach the landowners who are more passive?
12. Are there any parties who are more active in the issue? Who?

### **Solutions**

13. What do you see as possible solutions or ways to move forward with the situation?
14. Do you have anything you would like to add or ask?



## APPENDIX 4

Questions for Estonian Fund for Nature (ELF)

### **Background to Võhandu river landscape reserve**

1. Why is Võhandu worth a protected area status?
  - a. What values do you see in the area?
2. Please explain the current situation in the area.

### **ELF**

3. When did ELF get involved?
  - a. Who contacted you first?
4. What is ELF's role in this situation?
5. What are ELF's goals?
6. What is your opinion on what EB has done and has to do
  - a. What are they doing well? Examples
  - b. What could be done better? Examples
7. Who else has ELF communicated with on this issue?
  - a. Who should be included in finding a solution?

### **Other stakeholders**

8. What has been ELF's experience with communicating with EB? With locals?
  - a. What has been good? What should be improved?
9. What do you see as the main problem or main problems?
  - a. Are there any people who make the situation more difficult? Any who make it easier?
  - b. Are there any other obstacles? (bureaucracy, finance..)

### **Solutions**

10. What do you see as a possible solution or ways to move forward with the situation?
11. Do you have anything you would like to add or ask?