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Environmental Citizenship and Performed Participation in Regional Planning

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Background

- The article in preparation is part of doctoral research in environmental policy
- Participation and biodiversity conservation focus in regional-level planning and development
- Own role as a stakeholder in the participation processes



Regional-level planning in Finland

- Strong connection to regional development and growth-oriented vitality politics – planning hierarchy
- Can integrate cumulative environmental impacts and reconcile different land-use forms in rural landscapes
- Regional plan often only plan on large areas in rural landscape
- Changing legislation: monopoly of the municipalities in land-use planning, streamlining of the processes



Ecological democracy in existing planning context

- Developing political agency and participation is central to ecological democracy, while achieving it requires institutional and structural change, including redistribution of power (Pickering et al. 2022; Eckersley 2004).
- Participation is central in Finnish land-use planning context
 - But often remains formal, limited and performative in the context of environmental goals
 - May reproduce existing power relations and reinforce path dependencies
 - Limited consideration of environmental objectives



Ecological citizenship of ENGO activists

- Rights vs. responsibilities and agency (Dobson 2007)
- The right to participate: access to information, involvement in knowledge production, improving and monitoring decision-making – and the right of appeal (Heinilä 2025)
- Nature as political actor vs. advocacy-based representation
 - ENGO activists as advocates for nature
 - Citizenship shaped through active participation and agency
 - Active ecological citizenship beyond consumership and individual lifestyle choices, and beyond state-based citizenship



Researcher positionality

- Stakeholder perspective as an ENGO representative
 - Own experiences
 - Non-marginal local position
- Different forms of knowledge in land-use planning
 - Background: environmental engineering, environmental policy and law, work experience in planning



Case study

- Regional land-use planning and development in North Karelia
 - Theory-oriented reflexive thematic analysis: Understanding and utilising the subjectivity of the researcher (Braun & Clarke 2021)
 - Eight in-depth expert interviews (ENGO and public administration)
 - Observations and document analysis of the planning documents and ENGO opinions
- How are participation and ecological citizenship realised in regional land-use planning? And what kinds of participation spaces does regional planning represent?



Preliminary findings: Participation

- Participation as legitimizing and depoliticizing decision-making
- Participants' roles are predefined by the discourse of regional development and vitality
- The responsibility burden of public interest on ENGO
- Minor role of individuals in land-use planning
- Participation is valued in administration



Preliminary findings: Regional planning

- ENGO considers regional planning considered very important, but its steering effect remains unclear at the moment
- Regional planning as “high-level” planning – the responsibility is transferred to the local level
- Administration considers that regional planning is still needed to integrate different, conflictive perspectives
- Planning and development processes are inherently conflictive – which is widely accepted
- Comprehensive planning can, however, help prevent some unnecessary conflicts



Preliminary findings: Conservation advocacy

- ENGOs as advocates of nature
- The growing volume of green transition projects increases the burden of responsibility to represent the public interest in nature and environmental protection (e.g. mining, mineral extraction, peat, wind and solar power, power lines, forestry)
- The role of local environmental knowledge vs. natural scientific and legal expertise – different epistemic communities
- Social vs. ecological dimensions of sustainability in participation



Conclusions

- A need for critical reflection of participation practices and environmental objectives
- Participation and appeal rights are essential for rule of law and citizens' trust in democratic decision-making
- Decision-making behind closed doors increases uncertainty in already uncertain environmental issues
- Performative pseudo-participation weakens active citizens' motivation to participate
- Streamlining of planning and green transition projects permits may lead to increased forms of direct actions



Conclusions

- Regional planning and development create spaces for participation that enables environmental citizenship within just sustainability transition
- Selfless voluntary work already enacts ecological democracy in present processes
- Genuine participation can help to avoid polarisation, depoliticisation and juridification in planning while recognising and valuing local environmental knowledge

Kiitos!



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