

Stable or shifting visions? In search of nature and social bonds during the pandemic
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We all know what it's like to have a vision for your weekend, only to have to change your plans due to bad weather. You could look at a long-term forecast, but what happens when the forecast isn't accurate and a wildly unexpected event happens?

This is the central question behind our research on the way that "wildcard" events such as the global COVID-19 pandemic can affect an individual's vision for the way that a protected area should be managed. This type of vision (often called a normative scenario) going into the future (say, 2040) can help to chart a course for management action. There is a lot at stake in effective management of protected areas given a wealth of studies showing the importance of access to green space for physical and mental health and well-being, especially during the pandemic.

While envisioning processes can be useful in planning and management practices for clarifying desired futures, such processes may not account for real-world changes, such as climate-induced extreme weather or rapid rates of land conversion. Following up with stakeholders is important to consider the effects of such changes on management visions, but, to our knowledge, this follow-up has been rare in envisioning processes.

We approach this knowledge gap by exploring changes in stakeholder visions, values, and perceptions of landscape changes and underlying drivers of change in the Sierra de Guadarrama National Park, Spain. Using a novel combination of interviews, graphic tools and surveys, we gathered comparative data from stakeholders pre-pandemic (July 2019) and mid-pandemic (October 2020).

Our qualitative analysis demonstrates that pre-pandemic, differences in visions for protected area management were largely spurred by different perceptions of drivers of change, rather than differences in

values or perceived landscape changes, which were similar across different vision themes.

Mid-pandemic, most stakeholders reported that their values, visions and perceptions of drivers were largely stable. Where there were changes, stakeholders emphasized the impacts of mass visitation and mountain recreation when lockdown restrictions were lifted, shifting their visions towards a greater prioritization of biodiversity and nature conservation.

Our case study emphasizes the need for adaptive park management plans to cope with major system shocks. Inclusivity of stakeholder observations and knowledge is also critical for strengthening response to certain drivers, such as the use of local knowledge on controlled grazing practices to reduce fuel loads and manage the risk of wildfires. Given that stakeholder values were relatively stable during the pandemic, our case study suggests that management plans integrating stakeholder values have the potential to stay relevant even in the face of unexpected events. And while envisioning processes and scenario planning methodologies can be useful, we need to more strongly consider how drivers of change in the near and far future can be affected by wildcard events such as a pandemic.



Montes de Valsaín Special Protection Area of the Sierra de Guadarrama National Park
Credit: Veronica Lo.

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